# METAPHYSICAL REALISM AS LESS THAN A DOGMA

## RON WILBURN

Michael Williams has recently introduced a new type of realism. A realist claim about the *objects* of epistemological inquiry, *Epistemological Realism* maintains that "there are objective epistemological relations underlying the shifting contexts and standards of everyday justification". It contends that different kinds of "knowledge" group themselves into distinct epistemic natural kinds (e.g., "experiential" vs. "external worldly", as in foundationalism), some of which are just intrinsically prior, epistemically, to others. Now, epistemological realism, Williams tells us, is a highly problematic thesis. This is because, far from being intuitive or common sensible, it is instead thoroughly dependent upon a great deal of contentious philosophical dogma. And "external world" skepticism, Williams goes on to tell us, is derivatively problematic because it is underwritten, first and foremost, by epistemological realism (henceforth, ERealism), rather than by the much more intuitive Metaphysical Realism at whose door it is typically laid.

My concern in this paper is to clear the ground for a closer examination of Williams' critique of skepticism by defending the presupposition that he largely takes for granted, that MRealism is *not* the source of the skeptical problematic. To do this, we must argue that MRealism is much more accurately viewed as a platitude than as a contentious, theory–laden philosophical presupposition. That is, we must show that the skeptic's conception of the world's "objectivity" is, indeed, reasonably prosaic, rather than an unfortunate artifact of philosophizing itself. This is necessary if we are to see epistemological, rather than metaphysical realism, as doing most of the skeptic's dirty work.

As Crispin Wright notes, to talk of "realism", or even "realism" about some or other specific domain (e.g., external objects, other minds, scientific discourse, moral truth) without substantial qualification is to do

nothing more informative than clear one's throat (Wright 1992, p. 1). "Realism" is a very adaptable label which has been made to designate a host of different positions by a host of different philosophers. And obviously, where "realism" is equivocal, "objectivity" must be also, since to ask about the "objectivity" of the world is to simply inquire into its "realistic" status. Thus, it is important for us to note at the outset not just what (for our purposes) the doctrine of the objectivity of the world is; we must also clearly emphasize what it is not.

On a positive construal, the doctrine is similar to that which Harman has in mind: "There is a single causal or explanatory order out there, a world which is as it is quite independently of what anyone says or thinks about it" (Harman 1982, p. 569). Alternatively, we can liken it to Devitt's "Fig Leaf" Realism: the position that something [the world] exists "independently of the mental" (Devitt 1991, p. 23). Perhaps we can best liken the doctrine, however, to that which Wright invokes in describing the "modesty" component of "pre-theoretical" realism as our conviction that the world "exists independently of us, that it is as it is independently of the conceptual vocabulary in terms of which we think about it and that it is as it is independently of the beliefs about it that we do, will, or ever would form" (1992, pp. 1-2). The skeptic's conception of an "objective world" captures nothing more than the minimal idea that there exists some definite comprehensive reality or other, possessing whatever fully determinate character it has completely irrespective of-- albeit possibly in accordance with--cognizers' epistemic attitudes, infer-ential/representational propensities, and presuppositions about how truth and investigative method hook up. As such, this conception is not an empty or vacuous notion, but rather a conception of reality best affirmed by the exhaustive disjunction of physical theory and all the alternative non-naturalistic scenarios that the skeptic entertains (involving malign genies, global idealism and the like). Let's call the brand of objectivity at play here "Character–Independence". The world is Character-Independent, for the skeptic, by virtue of being determinately as it is regardless of any possible cognizer's presuppositions about how truth and investigative method hook up. With this locution in place, we may now speak of the skeptic's conception of the World-qua-Character-Independent-Reality. This is just that conception of "reality" which effectively refers to the actual world through nothing more than the bare ascription of Character-Independence. For convenience, I will refer to this conception of the world as MRealist and the doctrine that this concep-

tion applies to the world as MRealism. "MRealism", of course, stands for (minimalist) "metaphysical realism", and is to be directly contrasted with Williams' own "ERealism".

So understand, MRealism must be immediately distinguished from a number of alternative doctrines commonly captured by the "realist" label. For one thing, MRealism is a metaphysical doctrine, not a semantic one. Consider, by way of contrast, Dummett's take on realist issues (Dummett 1976, p. 68-69, pp. 153-155). Truth conditions, on his account, are reconstrued as justification conditions. And the stimulus for this reconstrual is Dummett's more seminal contention that nothing could ever count as a manifestation of one's understanding truth conditions that wouldn't better count as a manifestation of one's understanding justification conditions. Unlike some of Dummett's critics, I don't regard this contention as irrelevant to realist issues. However, I do take it to be highly implausible as it stands. The contention is relevant to realist concerns to the extent that it aims to undermine the semantical groundwork on which MRealist intuitions depend. If there were no comprehensible evidence-transcendent truth conditions, then the realist's convictions would indeed necessarily wax vacuous. The allegation is implausible, however, for at least two reasons. First, so much revision would have to follow in its train: The notion of logical consequence, in particular, would have to be substantively redefined, since by classical definition there is very definite linguistic behavior which is only explicable via explicit appeal to truth conditions (Kirkham 1992, pp. 260-263). Second, Dummett's account entails a significant semantic nihilism for anyone who accepts, as do probably most of us, any reasonably strong epistemological holism or evidential underdetermination of theory. Why? If there can be empirically equivalent competing theories of nature (even within immanent, scientific discourse) then none of these theories can be, on Dummett's account, singularly meaningful in any satisfying sense. I take this second objection to be the more potent in the context of my skeptical purposes. For I take it to be precisely that sort of theoretical consequence of an alleged antiskeptical remedy which effectively shows that the semantic theory underlying this remedy is no less prima facie counterintuitive than skepticism itself.

For another thing (semantic "realisms" aside), MRealism needs to be clearly distinguished from another, very different, doctrine of the world's "mind-independence" -- or better, with another very different, and essentially confused, mischaracterization of what the world's "mind-

independence" comes to. This alternative characterization of mind-independence's nature informs a perennial straw man in critical discussions of realism and objectivity, particularly as these notions relate to skeptical issues. Consider the early Williams' own remarks, for instance, in *Groundless Belief* (written approximately fifteen years before *Unnatural Doubts*). Here Williams writes: "Skepticism exerts its paralyzing effect only as long as (and indeed because) [its] notion of 'the world' is allowed to remain something completely unspecifiable" (Williams 1977, p. 101). On Williams' account here, the world's objectivity is certainly construed in the right terms (e.g., mind-independence, theory-transcendence). However, these right terms are themselves understood in the wrong sense (i.e. the sense of being indeterminate in character, and thereby uncapturable in principle by determinate predicative description). On such a telling, the conception of "objectivity" underwriting skepticism is that applicable to a conceptually indeterminate world above which our conceptually determinate beliefs must invariably float for lack of any possible fit. The skeptic's objective world is essentially ineffable on this account: a monistic Schopenhauerian unity, of sorts, to which the likes of Kantian-style categories cannot, even in principle, apply. But obviously this is not MRealist reality, which is fully determinate, even if character-independent and possibly unknowable.

The distinction between being Character-Independent and being Ontically Indeterminate would certainly seem to be clear enough. Thus it is interesting that the former feature is so often and so casually characatured as the latter. Williams is not the only philosopher who has done this (a mistake he conscientiously avoids in *Unnatural Doubts*). Consider Michael Devitt, for instance, and his claims regarding "fig leaf" realism, the position that "something exists independently of the mental" (Devitt 1991, p. 23). As it stands, this position is at least in the immediate neighborhood of MRealism. But, from the claim that this position is "so weak as to be uninteresting", Devitt goes on to assert that the position is not just "explanatorily useless, but "probably incoherent" (Ibid, p. 237). The allegations of theoretical "weakness", "uninterestingness" and "explanatory uselessness" are all compatible with an MRealist reading of the world's objectivity. The allegation of probable "incoherence", however is not, at least if it is taken literally. For, it is hard to see how this allegation could be fueled by anything except a conflation between the ascription of character-independence and the ascription of ontic indeterminacy. And, particularly in Devitt's case, it is clear that just this con-

flation occurs. Selectively invoking Kant's alleged equation of the noumenal with the essentially formless, Devitt emphasizes how "For Kant himself, the very idea of a causal constraint by the noumenal world is incoherent, because CAUSALITY is one of the concepts imposed by us" (Ibid., p. 238). Leaving Kant aside, moreover, Devitt expresses sympathy for constructivists' declaiming of the noumenal world as "a formless chaos of which one cannot even speak in the first place" (Ibid, p. 238). But it should be clear by now that this reflects an equivocation. However Kantians and others may have thought of the noumenal, MRealism does not posit a formless chaos: Once again, Character-Independence does not equal Ontic Indeterminacy. Williams and Devitt cannot be seen as effectively arguing that "mind-independent world" is "incoherent" or "unintelligible" by virtue of attempting to express the, in principle, ineffable.

The suggestion that the notion of a "noumenal", "mind-independent", or what I have called "Character-Independent", world is "incoherent", however, is much too perennial to be so quickly dismissed. It merits a page's pause. For, if the suggestion is not a literal accusation that "mind-independent" reality is utterly senseless because "mind-independent" reality is literally formless, and if it is not a simple epistemic/ontic confusion, then we need to ask "what is it?" Perhaps it is something quite prosaic. Perhaps it is merely the allegation that "the character-independent world" is radically underdescribed, and thus deeply insubstantive. Certainly, there is something to this idea. And there are reasons, in particular, to suppose that this may be what the early Williams has in mind. For, surely the degree of one's understanding of theories and doctrines and world views, and their consequent meaningfulness, is largely a function of the richness of descriptive detail of the account in question, especially that richness which effectively reduces the total number of seemingly disparate natural phenomena to be accounted for by providing a unifying theory of comprehensive predictive and explanatory force. Certainly, it would be absurd to deny that the assertion that classical physics obtains is more "coherent" than the bland pronouncement that MRealism obtains, in the specific sense that the former assertion provides greater comprehensibility by providing a more detailed, and a predictively/explanatorily more adequate, account to comprehend. Such comprehension stands to be enhanced by additional descriptive richness simultaneously along a number of dimensions. For instance, when systematicity increases through the consolida-

tion of explanatory principles, the story's capacity for epistemic self-accounting stands to increase, as the tale comes .to encompass more "second-order beliefs" governing rational theoretical revision and development over time" (Williams 1977, pp. 105-106). Classical mechanics constitutes a clear case in which "coherence" is fueled by descriptive richness. It does this by constituting a clear case in which our scientific understanding of the world under study is enhanced by a net reduction in the total number of natural phenomena and principles (e.g., Boyles-Charles law, Kepler's laws, Galileo's law) which we need to accept as simply unexplained and brute (Friedman 1974, pp. 91-92). And in the process, it identifies for us the full domain of evidence to which we can appeal in testing and amending the theory (e.g., the observed perturbations of Mercury suddenly become relevant to our account of terrestrial kinematics).

So, obviously there is something right about the suggestion that degree of "meaningfulness" follows degree of content. What is not obvious, however, is how this truism could ever be effectively used to make out the idea that MRealism is functionally meaningless by virtue of critical vacuity. This accusation would presumably have to proceed from the following sort of contention: The notion of a "Character-Independent" world is so insubstantive that it fails to exceed some minimal threshold of meaningfulness, some threshold below which concepts are simply too informationally impoverished to function as objects of genuine cognitive contemplation. But here the burden of proof is clearly on the shoulders of the accuser. For what is ultimately at issue is whether or not MRealism's poverty of systematic intentional content is so extreme as to undermine its referential determinacy. And it would certainly seem that our earlier characterization of Character-independent reality (i. e., "the world as it is, irrespective of what one may believe about it") is, on the contrary, descriptive enough to ensure referential success (unless, of course, MRealism is simply false rather than meaningless; but this is another matter). Granted, various terms of the formulation (e.g., "is", "one", "think") are vague, but this would hardly warrant the conclusion that particular background accounts (e.g., of existence, selfhood, cognition) need be provided in parochial terms (i.e., from within physics) for MRealism to be substantive enough to enjoy sufficient referential success. Such a demand would probably imply that very little of what we say about anything, even in ordinary contexts, is meaningful, given the unavoidable vagueness and ambiguity of ordinary language. In short, it

would seem to be incumbant upon those who would accuse MRealism of not meeting some critical meaningfulness threshold to identify and justify this threshold to anti-noumenal ends. Short of this, the accusation comes to little more than a disdainful post-Wittgensteinian sneer. For once again, what it offers us is a reponse to skepticism which relies upon a thesis about meaning which is, at the very least, no less prima facie counterintuitive than skepticism itself.

So far in this section, I have described both what MRealism is and is not, and in the course of this I have argued that presumption counts in favor of its coherence (i.e., intelligibility, meaningfulness). But, more than this, I would like to claim that presumption also counts in favor of its plausibility (or at least for its prosaic and non-artificial status). MRealism is a doctrine against which one must argue, I would like to suggest, rather than a doctrine which requires a definitive defense prior to its own provisional acceptance. Consider a remark of Kirkham's: "The default interpretation of almost any philosopher who utters a declarative clause is to take him or her as referring [or purporting to refer] to a mind-independent world unless and until we are given convincing reason not to do so" (Kirkham 1992, p. 193). I endorse this pronouncement with several amendments. First, I would dilute it so that the Default Interpretation at issue regards only a commitment to MRealism (to the objectivity of the world). This is considerably weaker than Kirkham's commitment (to the objectivity of the world plus the objectivity of semantic truth relations between this world and our utterances about it). Second, I would insist that most of the arguments that have been seemingly directed against MRealism's default status are often better viewed as directed not against MRealism, but rather against one or another doctrines with which MRealism may be confused. (In our critical discussions of Dummett and the early Williams above, we have already noted two such doctrines). In other instances, the rhetorical target is MRealism. However, no one accepting the default interpretation cited above is likely to find these arguments convincing. Using (and possibly abusing) an overworked term, let's call these "constructivist" accounts. "Constructivism" is a notoriously vague label, for at least two reasons. First it is often unclear on a first reading exactly which "antirealist" thesis a given constructivist intends. Second, it is even sometimes unclear whether a given constructivist knows himself what his intended antirealism comes to. Let me conclude with an unavoidably brief canvassing of these matters. (Devitt 1991, pp. 197-298)

Much of Rorty's work provides an example of the first sort. For instance, it is very easy to construe his recurrent attacks upon correspondence theory as attacks upon MRealism (or something like it) even though these two targets are, in fact, radically distinct. It is also misleading that the "world well lost" whose demise Rorty celebrates is easily mistaken for the world of Commonsense physics. This point requires special care. That the lion's share of our ordinary and refined scientific ontology is correct, for Rorty, is utterly unproblematic for Davidsonian reasons: We must suppose that any speakers' beliefs are largely true if we are to view that speaker as the kind of interconnected system of beliefs and desires that can count as a genuine language user (Rorty 1982, pp. 12-15). Thus, on Rorty's telling, it is not merely correct to say that our familiar and prosaic everyday/scientific world exists: This assertion, he claims, is too banal to even merit interest. The claim seems interesting, he tells us, only when we have equivocated between this construal of "the world" and the sort of MRealist conception of "the world" with which I have been encouraging intellectual dealings.

But even where Rorty's criticisms are clearly directed against MRealism, they are far from convincing. One of his indictments of this view is that it is "vacuous", in the manner or the early Williams, a quality he imputes to it often in the course of suggesting that whenever we try to talk about the world-in-itself, we invariably end up talking about some or other "particular theory about the world" instead. (Rorty 1982, p. 14). However, this is a claim which pleads for support--support which Rorty sees no need to provide. For, as it stands, presumption counts against this claim as a result of its patent reliance upon the misplaced assumption addressed above: the assumption that in claiming MRealism one must somehow, impossibly, say the ineffable rather than simply mouth the disjunctive formulation of possible ways the world could be (i.e., the world is some determinate way or other irrespective of our beliefs about it). Where Rorty's most potent-looking arguments against MRealism do ultimately occur is in the course his broadest and most controversial claims: those claims with which he is most closely identified. We must reject, he suggests, the "whole galaxy of [Kantian] notions" and distinctions between the likes of "passively received intuitions" and "representations" of the world which we allegedly form on the basis of these representations (Ibid., p. 16). There is a critical link between these sorts of distinctions and MRealism, Rorty tells us. However, this is an allegation that I have dealt with in another paper, where I have argued that,

where such a connection does exist, it is best seen as employed to *pro-skeptical* ends. (Wilburn 1997)

Kuhn's work provides an example of the second sort of confusing "constructivist" doctrine (where it seems plausible to say that the author himself is less than completely clear as to which particular constructivist or antirealist thesis he has in mind). Like many constructivists, Kuhn often endeavors to both have and eat his ontological cake. Consider the terms in which he purports to deal with phenomena like scientific progress and intertheoretic conflict in the face of his own alleged incommensurability of theories (Devitt 1991, p. 158). At one point he describes scientific progress as heightened success at "puzzle solving" while at the same time disallowing any possible grounding for the constancy of puzzles (Ibid., p. 158). At other points, Kuhn seems to make that very error to which I have recurrently referred: From observations about the theory-ladeness of our descriptions of the world, he goes on to conclude the indeterminacy, and hence the objective unreality, of a fixed world-object of inquiry. (Ibid., 241). Or, at least this seems to be a plausible reading of Kuhn's recurrent talk about changes in reality accompanying, or being somehow constituted by, corresponding changes in theory (Kuhn 1962, pp. 114, 117). But, by now the problem with such reasoning is clear. Because the world and our theories about the world are quite distinct sorts of items, the mere fact that description of the world must take place *in language* does not preclude the existence of an invariant and character-independent reality being (accurately or inaccurately) captured by these descriptions. There is a lacuna in Kuhn's argument that could only be filled by an ad hoc and implausible principle which purports to connect the theory-ladeness of one's description of an object with the ontic indeterminacy of that object itself.

It may ultimately be to Goodman and Putnam, then, that contemporary philosophy's clearest and least equivocal eschewals of MRealism can be traced (Goodman pp. 1978,1984; Putnam 1981,1987). Both authors reject Character-Independent reality on the grounds that there can be numerous incompatiable "true" versions of "reality". I will not take up these arguments here, however, as I take I take them to have been conclusively rebutted by others who have noted in detail how there is hardly a single incompatibility invoked by Goodman or Putnam which cannot be explained away as merely apparent. And of those few cited which are even arguably genuine, there is not a single one which points out con-

flicting beliefs which one *must* simultaneously accept. (Devitt 1991, p. 236; Wilson 1981; Walterstorf 1987; McMichael 1988)

The critical survey of the preceding few pages must, I grant, seem less than conclusive to anyone who staunchly rejects the Default Interpretation of our claim-making practices. But, ultimately, I doubt that such folk can ever be convinced that MRealism is anything more than a bizarre (at best) and meaningless (at worst) invocation of a supernatural order. To those sympathetic to the default interpretation, however, I hope to have explained a number of things about why it may seem so right to them. Primarily, I hope to have effectively highlighted how MRealism is less than a substantive and philosophically loaded dogma (at least as dogmas go). Secondarily, I hope to have illustrated how a number of arguments seemingly directed against MRealism turn out to be directed elsewhere; and how various other arguments, though much more plainly aimed at MRealism, clearly miss their mark.

*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

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