The Neglected Controversy Over Metaphysical Realism[1]

MARY KATE McGOWAN

As a general rule, philosophers convert the commonplace into the questionable. Doubting what most people take for granted, philosophers thrive on exposing what is controversial about what generally passes as obvious. Sometimes, however, we do the opposite and treat something controversial as if it were unquestionable. This, I contend, is what we have done with metaphysical realism (m-realism), the claim that there is a single objective *way that the world is*.[2] As if it were a mere extension of common sense, m-realism is alleged to be the only way of making sense of our practices. It is not. As we shall see, m-realism is a complex and controversial amalgam of claims that are neither obvious nor inevitable.

In what follows, I motivate and clarify the controversy over m-realism by defending m-realism against two objections. Although these objections are, in the final analysis, misguided, it is nevertheless worthwhile to consider them. A clear understanding of why these objections are misguided goes a considerable distance in illuminating the complex and controversial nature of m-realism. Once the complex thesis is defined, some objections to it are considered. Since m-realism is such a complex and controversial thesis, it cannot legitimately be treated as inevitable unless, of course, there are no viable alternatives to it. For this reason, a brief defense of non-realist metaphysics is offered. Since m-realism is both controversial and substantive, a commitment to it requires both explicit recognition and sustained defense.

In what follows, I motivate a metaphysical debate about the status of certain properties. Although those metaphysicians working directly on this debate are generally aware of its complex and sub-

[1] I thank Catherine Z. Elgin, Sally Haslanger, Eli Hirsch, David Lewis, David Sanford, Kenneth Winkler and Bas van Fraassen for helpful comments.

[2] There is considerable disagreement over which thesis (or combination of theses) is appropriately called metaphysical realism. I recognize that other theses have a legitimate claim to the name, but I am here less concerned with the appropriation of the term than I am with the issues at hand.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

stantive nature, others are not so well informed but ought to be. It seems to be standard practice, for example, for a philosopher of language to assume that there is an objective world-structure able to constrain reference. It also appears to be an unproblematic assumption in the philosophy of science since an objective world-structure is required to ground various realist theses. It is my aim in this paper to illuminate the substantive and controversial nature of such assumptions.

Finally, in developing the thesis of metaphysical realism, I am not delineating a single position. Rather, I am characterizing a sort of position. After all, metaphysical realists can, and indeed do, differ in a variety of ways.

2. The Debate

The debate surrounding m-realism centres on the objectivity of the world's structure. Since m-realism maintains that the world's structure is objective, there is an important sense in which the world's structure does not depend on us, according to m-realism. Of course, there are uncontroversial ways in which the world's structure depends on us and m-realism ought to be able to recognize them. By causally interacting with the world, for example, we change how parts of it are and, since we are a part of the world, *how we are* partially determines *how the world is*. Facts about Catherine, for example, fix facts about the world; they (trivially) fix facts about just that part of the world that is Catherine. M-realism certainly does not deny that the world's structure depends on us in either of these ways.

In what sense then does m-realism maintain that the world is entirely independent of us? As we shall see, the issue boils down to the objectivity of a constraint on properties.[3] Although this will be discussed in more detail in § 4, in order for the world to be able to constrain our empirical theorizing, some properties must be privileged at the expense of others. Since empirical claims are about the world (or proper parts of it), *what the world is like* constrains what we can truly say about it but, in order to function as such a constraint, the world must be discriminately structured. To say that the world is structured is just to say that the world is individuated into

[3] Properties are just what members of an extension share. Since this need not be anything more than belonging to a particular extension, no ontological question is begged against the nominalist. Note also that many-placed properties cover relations.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particular things and kinds of things. (A structure is just an instantiation pattern of properties.) To say that the world is discriminately structured is just to say that not every way of individuating the world into things and kinds of things is on a par. Since we need to be discriminating about things and kinds of things, we need to be discriminating about properties. To be choosy about structures requires being choosy about just which properties are such that their instantiation pattern defines a genuine structure of the world. That is, a constraint on properties is required to distinguish the structure-defining properties from all the rest.

This need to be discriminating about properties raises an interesting issue: In virtue of what is a structure-defining property structure defining—us or the world? The m-realist maintains that the structure-defining status of properties is an entirely objective matter while the non-realist maintains instead that we somehow make a property structure-defining. Something about our interests and activities (either individual or collective, conscious or not) fixes facts about which properties are right for individuating the world. Since we determine the structure-defining status of certain properties, there is an important sense in which the world's structure depends on us, according to non-realism. By privileging the structure-defining properties, we thereby carve the world into the things and kinds of things composing it. According to non-realism then the world's structure depends on us because we determine which particular properties define that structure. M-realists deny this. According to m-realism, since the structure-defining status of properties is entirely independent of us, so too is the structure of the world. M-realists maintain that the world is individuated independently of us so that there is an entirely objective way that it is. Granted that this characterization of the nature of the debate is somewhat vague but this somewhat sketchy characterization is sufficient (and perhaps even necessary) to motivate the objections that follow. The precise nature of the debate is clarified in subsequent discussion.

3. First Objection

Since m-realism maintains that the structure-defining status of the structure-defining properties is entirely objective, m-realism thereby maintains that which particular properties are right for individuating the world is an entirely objective matter. The following cases appear to undermine m-realism by demonstrating that which particular properties are right for various tasks depends on us.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Which particular properties are right (or appropriate) for describing some object or situation seems to depend on contextual factors that include our interests. Suppose, for example, that my friend Sue asks me to describe my friend Mike and I launch into a detailed description of the microphysical properties of his muscle tissue. Even if my description is true, it is nevertheless defective. Since Sue is interested in Mike's personality and not the microphysical details of his muscle tissue (which would be true enough of any other person anyway), the information imparted is simply irrelevant. In virtue of capturing irrelevant aspects of Mike, these microphysical properties are inappropriate describers of Mike. This case suggests that which properties are right (or appropriate) depends on considerations of relevance. Since relevance clearly depends on the interests at hand and such interests are ours, it seems that we are responsible for privileging the appropriate properties. Contra m-realism, it seems that rightness of categorization is at least sometimes a subjective matter.

M-realism maintains that the right way to individuate the world is an entirely objective matter, but certain cases appear to demonstrate that the right way to individuate also depends on our interests. Consider a bag containing thirteen bagels. Thirteen bagels plus a bag is fourteen objects. Although there is a sense in which this stuff constitutes fourteen objects, it counts as single thing when checking out at the '12 items or fewer' lane of the local supermarket. It counts as a single item, in this context, because we are primarily interested in which things scan as units. Although appropriate in other contexts, the property of being an individual bagel is an inappropriate property for individuating at the supermarket. Clearly, which properties are right for individuating varies with the context and our interests.

Since which properties are right (at least sometimes) depends on our interests and since our interests vary, whether or not a particular property is right is relative. Consider the property grue. Something is grue if and only if it is first observed before the year 2008 and it is green or it is not so observed and it is blue.[4] Arguably, green is a better property for describing the world than grue. But for the purpose of making a philosophical point about the nature of induction, grue is better than green. Whether or not a property is right or appropriate depends on the task and the interests at hand. Since the interests are ours, which properties are right (privileged) seems quite clearly to depend on us.

[4] Goodman, 'The New Riddle of Induction,' *Fact, Fiction and Forecast* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These cases seem to undermine m-realism by demonstrating that rightness of categorization is not always entirely objective. Even if the world's structure is objectively fixed, as m-realism maintains, it seems that we nevertheless have a certain amount of leeway with respect to which aspects of the (objectively fixed) world we bother to label and/or pay attention to. Since m-realism maintains that rightness of categorization is entirely objective, it is unclear whether or not m-realism can account for this leeway. Whether we have a label for a certain aspect of the world (whether that aspect is objectively fixed or not) depends on our aims and goals in dealing with the world. Thus, which properties are worth labeling depends, at least partially, on us. Moreover, even in cases where we have a label for a property, the property may nevertheless be disqualified for a certain task in a certain context. Such seems to be the case with the microphysical properties of muscle tissue that were disqualified describers of Mike. Such properties are worth labeling, but they are nevertheless irrelevant in some contexts. Since it is our interests that disqualify them, it seems that property privileging depends on us.

Such cases illustrate that we are at least sometimes responsible for making a property right or appropriate for tasks like describing and individuating. These cases challenge m-realism because it appears that m-realism is committed to the (implausible) claim that which properties are right for describing and individuating the world is always an entirely objective matter. Since m-realism places an objective constraint on properties, it seems that the m-realist must in turn maintain that rightness of categorization is also (and always) entirely objective. Since these cases suggest otherwise, they undermine m-realism. Moreover, since these cases are so common place, any adequate theory must be able to account for them. If m-realism cannot, it is doomed.

While these examples do indeed illustrate that property privileging can be subjective, they also illustrate that there are several different sorts of property privileging. A property may be privileged because it is structure-defining, because it is worth labeling or because it is especially appropriate for a certain task in a certain context. If m-realism fails to distinguish between these different types of property privileging and/or if it maintains that they are all entirely objective, then m-realism is indeed undermined by these cases. If, on the other hand, m-realism's objectivity claim somehow only pertains to the sort of property privileging that fixes the world's structure, then it is open to the m-realist to maintain that these other sorts of property privileging do (or at least can) depend on us. Since these cases deal with these other sorts of property

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

privileging, m-realism's commitment to an objective world structure is compatible with the alleged subjectivity of these other sorts of property privileging. In the following section, I argue that m-realism maintains that, although there is a mandatory objective constraint on properties, there are additional constraints which may be subjective. Since m-realism is thereby compatible with the existence of subjective constraints on properties, cases demonstrating the existence of such supplemental but subjective constraints do not undermine it.

4. Response: Different Property Privileging Problems

We have seen that some properties are more appropriate than others for certain tasks. In what follows, I distinguish between two distinct property-privileging problems. M-realism is defended against the charge of the previous section by pointing out that m-realism's objectivity claim concerns only one of these property-privileging problems while the objection concerns the other.

Since some properties are more qualified than others to perform various roles, some sort of a constraint on properties is needed to distinguish the qualified from the unqualified. As we shall see, there are different sorts of constraints on properties and these different constraints meet quite different property privileging needs. The first constraint, concerning what I call the primary property-privileging problem, is needed to avoid trouble with triviality and incoherence. Unless we are choosy about properties, similarity and empirical truth are both trivial and incoherent.

Consider similarity. Suppose that similarity is a matter of sharing properties but that one is not at all discriminating about which properties. If all properties are on par then any two things (no matter what they are like) are maximally similar to one another. This is so because there are infinitely many properties that the two things share. A consideration of different properties, though, yields the opposite similarity judgment about the very same two things. Since there are infinitely many properties that one thing instantiates but that the other thing does not, the same two things are also maximally dissimilar from one another. Clearly, a coherent and non-trivial notion of similarity requires a constraint on properties.

Such a choosiness about properties is also a necessary constraint on reference and hence empirical truth. Names refer to particular things and general terms refer to collections of things, but unless one is discriminating about which particular things and which particular collections of things are eligible to be referents, reference is

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

trivialized. For any self-consistent claim, there is some way of individuating the world into things and kinds of things that makes the claim true. Since two self-consistent claims can contradict one another, a constraint on properties is needed to avoid incoherence. For a detailed proof of this point, see Putnam's model-theoretic argument.[5] Since eligibility of referent is really a matter of degree, I henceforth speak in terms of eligible enough referents.[6]

A constraint on properties is required then to avoid trouble with incoherence and triviality. Such constraints can differ in a variety of ways including strength. Stronger constraints privilege fewer, and disqualify more, properties. In what follows, I assume that such constraints exist and that at least some are adequate (i.e. strong enough to avoid such trouble with triviality and incoherence). The properties privileged by such a constraint are called structure-defining. Only structure-defining properties define a privileged structure of the world. Since structures are instantiation patterns of properties, being discriminating about which properties are structure-defining enables one to be discriminating about structures. Privileged structures selectively individuate the world into the things and kinds of things eligible enough to be referred to. In this way, privileged structures constrain reference and hence enable the world's structure to constrain our empirical theorizing.

The structure-defining properties also afford a constraint on similarity. Two things are genuinely similar to one another in some respect just in case they both instantiate the same structure-defining property. Sharing non-structure-defining properties does not count as a genuine aspect of similarity. Two things are genuinely dissimilar in some respect just in case one instantiates a structure-defining property that the other does not. So long as the constraint on the structure-defining properties is sufficiently discriminating, similarity-in-some-respect is neither trivial nor incoherent. Absolute similarity, a matter of degree, is constituted by the number of genuine aspects of similarity shared by any two objects.

[5] Although intended as a refutation of m-realism, Putnam's model-theoretic argument demonstrates that unless one is choosy about properties, any consistent theory is true. Lewis refers to this result as 'Putnam's bomb'. See his 'Putnam's Paradox' in *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 62, No. 3, September 1984, pp. 221–36. Elgin also discusses this result in her 'Unnatural Science', *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XCII, No. 6, June 1995, pp. 289–302.

[6] For an excellent discussion of the need for a constraint on reference and for treating it as a matter of degree, see Lewis, 'New Work for a Theory of Universals,' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 61, No. 4, December 1983, pp. 343–77.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Being structure-defining is one way in which a property can be privileged but there are others. Since there are other reasons (besides avoiding trouble with triviality and incoherence) to be discriminating about which (structure-defining) properties play certain other roles, there are additional constraints on properties. The structure-defining properties are eligible enough to refer, but since not everything that can be said is worth saying, there are reasons to be discriminating about even them.

Suppose that I am asked to describe my sister and I start by listing the times when it is true that she is chewing. Although I describe her in terms that are certainly eligible enough to refer, these genuine properties of my sister are nevertheless illegitimate because they are irrelevant. Only some structure-defining properties capture the characteristics that are relevant in a certain context. Thus, supplemental constraints, guided by relevance considerations, are required.

Metaphors call attention to supplemental constraints by relying on them. They call attention to selective similarities. Consider the claim 'Love is a battlefield'.[7] Although metaphors call attention to properties already shared by the objects compared, not all shared properties are highlighted by the metaphor. Both battlefields and love are things discussed by Tolstoy, but this is certainly not any part of what the metaphor is expressing. A battlefield is at least partially composed of literal dirt while love is not. This dissimilarity, however, does not tell against the metaphor. As we can see, the very coherence of metaphors requires that we are somehow able to discriminate between the properties that matter and those that do not. Although metaphors require a discriminating attitude towards properties, this need to be choosy about properties is relevantly different from the constraint on structure-defining properties. The ineligible aspects of similarity (or dissimilarity) are disqualified not because they are utterly ineligible to refer, but because they are irrelevant in the present context. Being composed of dirt and being discussed by Tolstoy are genuine aspects of the world that we are able to refer to. Such properties then are structure-defining but they are here disqualified because they are irrelevant.

Although the primary constraint on (structure-defining) properties keeps the property-sharing notion of similarity from falling into incoherence, supplemental constraints are nevertheless involved. Both the eyes of the first newborn of the year 2009[8] and my mother's emerald ring are grue, but there is certainly a sense in which this

[7] This is the title of a song by Pat Benatar.

[8] I am under the impression that all newborns have blue eyes.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

does not constitute a genuine aspect of similarity. Since grue is eligible enough to refer, it is structure-defining and so can (in some sense) constitute a genuine aspect of similarity. If grue is indeed illegitimate in this context, then it is unprivileged because it fails to meet some additional (presumably subjective) constraint.

Clearly there are other reasons (besides a need to avoid trouble with triviality and incoherence) to be discriminating about properties. Unlike the primary constraint, that distinguishes the structure-defining properties from all the rest, such supplemental constraints distinguish amongst the structure-defining properties and privilege the ones that are especially well suited to the task at hand. The debate over m-realism concerns the nature of the **primary** constraint on (structure-defining) properties and is not at all concerned with the nature of such supplemental constraints. M-realism maintains that the constraint on the structure-defining properties is objective, but implies nothing whatsoever about the nature of such supplemental constraints. Because m-realism is agnostic about the nature of such supplemental constraints, m-realism is compatible with them being subjective. By leaving room for the possibility of additional subjective constraints, m-realism can account for the subjective nature of what determines which aspects of the complex (objective) structure are relevant (in a certain context) and therefore worthy of our attention.

5. Second Objection

Besides maintaining that the world's structure is objective, m-realism also maintains that it is unique. There is a **single** objective *way that the world is,* according to m-realism and, in virtue of this uniqueness claim, m-realism is committed to the existence of a single correct and complete description of the world. This commitment seems overly restrictive. If there is only one ultimately correct way to describe the world, then it seems that genuinely alternative descriptions of the world (and parts of it) cannot be equally legitimate.[9] This seems wrong since alternative but equally legitimate descriptions are common place. I can describe something as either a wooden piece of furniture or as a particular configuration of particles. The challenge is to show that m-realism's uniqueness claim is compatible with the acceptability of genuinely alternative, but equally legitimate, descriptions.

[9] Putnam makes this charge. See his *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1987) pp. 1–21.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

6. Response

Although m-realism does indeed involve a substantive uniqueness claim, this uniqueness claim is nevertheless compatible with the phenomenon of alternative and equally legitimate descriptions of the world (and of parts of it). The world can be described in a variety of legitimate ways because the world can be described legitimately at various levels of detail. In order to capture different levels of descriptive detail, a consideration of the distinction between base and supervenient properties proves helpful. A property is supervenient if and only if differences in its instantiation pattern must be accompanied by differences in the instantiation pattern of base properties. Molecular properties, for example, supervene on atomic properties because there cannot be a difference at the molecular level without a difference at the atomic level. First, supervenience is clearly a modal notion but that modality will not be further analysed here.[10] Second, not all differences at the base level make a difference at the supervenient level since some changes at the atomic level do not 'register' at the molecular level. Third, any property trivially supervenes on itself but such trivial supervenience is henceforth ignored. As we shall see, m-realism maintains that there are structure-defining properties at various levels (supervenient and base) thus allowing for alternative correct descriptions.

As it has been defined so far, being a base property is a relative matter. The property of being wooden supervenes on molecular properties which, in turn, supervene on atomic properties. Thus molecular properties are both supervenient (relative to the atomic properties) and base (relative to the property of being wooden). In what follows, I reserve the term 'base property' for those properties that are not also (non-trivially) supervenient properties. Note that whether or not there are any instances of such base properties is a contingent matter. If the world is infinitely complex, for example, then all properties supervene on lower-level properties. M-realism's uniqueness claim pertains to the base. According to m-realism, if there is a base, then there is only one such base.

First, this uniqueness claim is conditional. M-realism maintains that **if** the world is not infinitely complex, then there is an objective constraint on the base structure-defining properties sufficiently strong to privilege a unique base. M-realism is defined in this way in order to avoid being saddled *a priori* with the truth of the contingent claim that the world is only finitely complex.

[10] For a discussion of this issue, see David Lewis', *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Second, this uniqueness claim is intended to avoid a certain sort of redundancy in the base. One might wonder what redundancy in the base could be since the most familiar cases of redundancy involve properties at different levels of detail. Consider the following example. A particle is positime if and only if either that particle is first observed before the year 2009 and it is positively charged or it is not so observed and it is negatively charged. Similarly, a particle is negatime if and only if either that particle is first observed before the year 2009 and it is negatively charged or it is not so observed and it is positively charged. Supposing that 'positive' and 'negative' are base properties, then so are 'positime' and 'negatime'. Note that, for each time t, there is an analog pair of properties. To accept one such pair is either to accept them all or to make an arbitrary choice amongst them. To accept them all is extremely redundant. The non-redundancy (uniqueness) requirement is meant to exclude precisely this sort of redundancy.

Although m-realism's uniqueness claim is intended to exclude this sort of redundancy, other sorts may, however, be permissible. Consider the properties 'continuous' and 'discontinuous'. Choosing between them on the basis of naturalness seems utterly arbitrary but using them both is redundant since each is definable in terms of the other. Perhaps it is the symmetry between these inter-definable properties that renders this sort of redundancy compatible with m-realism. (The properties 'positive', 'negative', and 'neutral' provide a similar example.) In any case, the non-redundancy requirement is flexible enough to allow this sort of redundancy in the base. As a result, a clarification is in order. M-realism maintains that **if** the world is only finitely complex, then there is an objective constraint on the base structure-defining properties sufficiently strong to privilege a unique-**ish** base. Since certain sorts of redundancy in the base are compatible with m-realism, it is not committed to the stronger (conditional) claim that a finitely complex world has a unique base.

Since m-realism's uniqueness claim pertains to it, our attention has been focused on the base, but m-realism also recognizes privileged supervenient structures. According to m-realism, there is an objective constraint on supervenient properties so that only some supervenient properties define a privileged supervenient structure of the world. First, a constraint on supervenient properties is necessary. Consider a position that constrains the base structure-defining properties while denying that there is any constraint whatsoever on the supervenient structure-defining properties. According to this position, any property that supervenes on the base structure-

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

defining properties is itself structure-defining. Thus, there are a non-denumerable number of collections of supervenient structure-defining properties and each such collection privileges a supervenient structure.[11] Without a constraint on supervenient structure-defining properties, there are enough supervenient structures (and they are sufficiently varied) to make any consistent empirical theory true.[12] Second, since m-realism countenances privileged supervenient structures, it allows for multiple correct descriptions of the world. (Since there are many supervenient levels, there can be many supervenient structures.[13]) Alternative correct descriptions are legitimate if they are correct descriptions of different privileged (supervenient or base) structures. In this way, and despite its uniqueness claim, m-realism is compatible with the commonplace observation that the world can be correctly described in many ways and at various levels. Despite this, there is nevertheless a sense in which m-realism countenances (the possibility of) a single correct description of the world.[14] The description that accurately describes the unique-ish base is ultimately correct in virtue of accurately describing the world in it utmost detail.

7. M-realism has its Drawbacks

M-realism maintains that there is an objective constraint on the supervenient structure-defining properties and, so long as the world is only finitely complex, this objective constraint on the base structure-defining properties is sufficiently strong to privilege a unique-ish base. Now that the thesis of m-realism is properly explicated, one can see that, instead of being a mere philosophical precisification of common sense, it is a fairly complex combination of substantive claims. Such a complex claim can hardly be obvious.

[11] A non-denumerable number of structure-tokens, by itself, is not fatal since they each might vary from one another only slightly. Suppose, for example, that these structures only disagree about the exact spatio-temporal boundary of a certain cloud. Since these supervenient structures resemble one another so closely, they are well able to constrain our empirical theories.

[12] I have in mind the sort of trivialization problems that Putnam's model-theoretic argument raises. See § 3.

[13] It is here left open whether realism maintains that structure-tokens at each supervenient level are unique-ish.

[14] Such a description is merely possible because some of the base properties, although label-able, may not be labeled.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Arguably, all metaphysical systems are suspect on close inspection and m-realism is no exception. In what follows, I point out some of its drawbacks. Note that I not arguing against m-realism. I am merely pointing to some of its questionable commitments and/or consequences.

M-realism's constraint on supervenient structure-defining properties must balance two competing requirements and it is unclear whether or not m-realism can account for how this is done. On the one hand, the constraint must be strong enough to avoid trouble with triviality but, on the other hand, it must also be lenient enough to permit reference to the middle-sized objects of common sense. Thus, unless the m-realist forgoes referential access to everyday objects, this constraint has a delicate balancing act to perform and it is unclear whether or not the m-realist can offer independent reason to think that such a balance is struck. Since the m-realist's constraint is entirely objective, it is out of our hands and thus independent of our interests. Arguably, the non-realist does not have this particular problem. Since, according to non-realism, we do the privileging, it is not surprising that we do so in a way that meets our needs.[15]

There is something else mysterious about m-realism's objective constraint on properties. Either the m-realist posits entities whose nature explains the discriminatory function of the constraint or not. If entities are postulated, a substantial ontological commitment is thereby incurred and the explanatory problem is simply pushed back to the nature of that entity. If, however, the distinction between the privileged properties and all the rest is a primitive objective one, then m-realism is subject to the charge that it simply presupposes (in an ad hoc fashion) precisely what it needs to perform the delicate balancing act required. Non-realism does not have this problem since we somehow constrain properties and we are presumably already countenanced.

M-realism also supports scepticism. Since the world's structure is entirely independent of us, even an ideal theory may be false according to m-realism. Thus, no amount of theoretical or predictive success is sufficient evidence of truth. Because of this, one might argue against m-realism on the grounds that an objective but ultimately unknowable world is not worth presupposing in the first place.[16]

Finally, m-realism needs to be able to recognize various ways in

[15] Of course the non-realist has other problems. For example, the non-realist must explain how we manage to privilege properties in the first place.

[16] Elgin argues that m-realism generates new sceptical problems. See her 'Unnatural Science', *Journal of Philosophy* (Vol. 92, No. 6, June 1995).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

which the world depends on us. Consider first things like tables and cars. Such things depend on us because we make them. As discussed earlier though (in § 2), the causal dependence of artifacts does not threaten the independence claim of m-realism. M-realism denies that the status of certain properties depends on us but it does not deny the common sense fact that we causally affect the world. Although the causal dependence of tables and cars does not threaten m-realism, other sorts of artifacts may.

Consider, for example, the law. The law is a social institution and an artifact of our construction.[17] Consequently, the very concept of a lawyer is conceptually tied to this institution and hence to us. Without the law, there would be no lawyers and this is so even if the people who actually are lawyers would nevertheless exist without the law. Since we do not causally construct the people who are in fact lawyers, being a lawyer depends on us in a different way than tables and cars do. Moreover, this new sort of dependence raises a particular challenge for m-realism's objective constraint on properties. It is at least mysterious how an entirely objective constraint can privilege properties like lawyerhood. First notice that whether or not there are any lawyers depends on us (because it depends on the existence of the law, which is our construction). The m-realist must therefore maintain that the privileging of certain properties (like lawyerhood) is independent of us, our constructions and whether or not there are any instances of the property in question. This result is at least initially counter-intuitive.[18] Although the m-realist may very well be able to tell some plausible story about how such properties are privileged entirely independently of us, the story must involve considerable complexity.

In sum, the m-realist will need to account for various sorts of dependencies when distinguishing between what is up to us and what is not. The privileging of the property of lawyerhood is but one especially challenging example. Arguably, the non-realist has less work to do. Since, for the non-realist, there is nothing that is entirely independent of us, the non-realist has at least one less line to draw. Moreover, since m-realism maintains that the world is (in

[17] For a discussion of various sorts of construction, see Sally Haslanger, 'Ontology and Social Construction', *Philosophical Topics*, (ed.) Sally Haslanger, Vol. 23, No. 2, Fall 1995, 95–125.

[18] There is good reason to want the privileged properties to be constant across possible worlds and, if this is so, then there must be properties that are privileged but instantiated in particular worlds. Note also that a purely extensionalist theory of properties must countenance possibilia or some such substitute.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

some important sense) entirely independent of us, it is especially important for the m-realist to draw such lines in the first place.

As we have seen, m-realism has definite drawbacks. Its objective constraint on properties must be of the appropriate strength to both avoid trouble with triviality and preserve our common sense referential practices. In addition, such a constraint either requires a substantive ontological commitment or a mysterious primitive distinction. M-realism also supports (and arguably aggravates) traditional skeptical problems. The m-realist must introduce certain complexities in order to account for the ways in which the world (and the correct way to characterize it) does indeed depend on us. In light of these drawbacks, it is clear that m-realism is a complex and controversial thesis. Why then has it been treated as if it were a mere extension of common sense? The answer, I think, is that, through a widespread misunderstanding of the very nature of the debate, m-realism is mistakenly thought to be without viable alternatives.

8. Brief Defense of Non-realism

This misunderstanding manifests itself in misguided *reductio ad absurdum* arguments against any position denying the central tenets of m-realism. In particular, some (more in conversation than in print) contend that m-realism is the only tenable metaphysical system going because denying it implies (or otherwise requires) either verificationism or idealism and, since these doctrines are alleged to be refuted, m-realism is the only viable option. This is a mistake. Denying m-realism does not imply or otherwise require either of these theses. Moreover, even if it did, this would fall considerably short of establishing m-realism since an independent refutation of the theses in question would be required. Any refutation of these theses that itself presupposes m-realism would beg the question at issue.

A denier of m-realism can certainly deny idealism. One can maintain that the world is composed of mind-independent physical stuff but nevertheless maintain we are somehow responsible for the structure-defining status of properties.[19] Because, according to non-

[19] Of course, merely calling it 'stuff' is already imposing a structure on it. What the denier of metaphysical realism countenances cannot be described independent of that which individuates it but the m-realist encounters similar statability issues. For an explicit exploration of these issues, see van Fraassen's 'Putnam's Paradox: Metaphysical Realism Revamped and Evaded,' in *Philosophical Perspectives*, Vol. 11 (Boston: Blackwell, 1997) pp. 17–42.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

realism, the privileged status of the structure-defining properties depends on us and hence on minds, there is a sense in which the world's structure is mind dependent. But this is clearly a different sort of mind dependence. The denier of m-realism maintains that the correct way of individuating the world depends on minds but does not claim that the world is entirely composed of minds and ideas within them.

Consider next verificationism, which comes in at least two forms. Epistemic verificationism maintains that we will eventually access the empirical truth while semantic verificationism defines truth in terms of our ability to access it. (Semantic verificationists claim things like truth is idealized warranted assertability.) Although related, these verificationist doctrines are nevertheless distinct. After all, epistemic verificationism is an epistemological doctrine while semantic verificationism concerns the nature of truth. Denying m-realism does not imply (or otherwise require) either of these verificationist doctrines. Consider first epistemic verificationism. Non-realism maintains that we somehow determine which properties are structure-defining, but it need not guarantee that we are thereby aware of which properties we privilege. Moreover, even if a particular form of non-realism does guarantee this, having the correct properties for describing the world falls short of a correct (and complete) description of the world in terms of those properties. Consequently, a non-realist can certainly deny epistemic verificationism. Since a non-realist is free to treat truth as correspondence to the (subjectively privileged) structure of the world, the non-realist can also deny semantic verificationism. Since denying m-realism does not require idealism or either of the verificationisms, it is a mistake to dismiss non-realism because of such an alleged commitment.

Since m-realism is so complex, there are a variety of ways to reject all or parts of it. As a result, non-realism comes in many forms. For instance, a non-realist could maintain that there is an objective constraint functioning at the base level, that is sufficiently strong to privilege a unique-ish base, but insist that we fix the supervenient structures.[20] Or, a non-realist could maintain that there are objective constraints functioning at all levels, but these constraints are so weak that we must do additional discriminatory work in order to avoid the aforementioned trouble with triviality. Of

[20] For a discussion of this position, see McGowan, 'The Metaphysics of Squaring Scientific Realism with Referential Indeterminacy', *Erkenntnis*, Vol. 50, Issue 1, 1999, pp. 87–94.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press

course, a non-realist can also maintain that all constraints on properties are subjective.

9. Conclusion

This paper defends m-realism against two objections. In the course of defending m-realism against these charges, the component claims of m-realism are both clarified and motivated. Instead of being an obvious precisification of mere common sense, m-realism is a complex combination of substantive claims. It contends that there is an objective constraint on the supervenient structure-defining properties and (so long as the world is only finitely complex) this constraint on the base structure-defining properties is sufficiently strong to privilege a unique-ish base. The sheer complexity of the thesis aside, m-realism also generates questionable consequences and makes dubious commitments. With all of these drawbacks, it is a genuine wonder that m-realism is treated as the default metaphysics. One reason for this, I contend, is that theorists mistakenly think that a rejection of m-realism requires either verificationism or idealism. It does not. Non-realism is entirely separable from each of these theses. By exposing the substantive commitments of m-realism and by pointing out some of its drawbacks, this paper does two important things. First, it shows that it is philosophically illegitimate to treat m-realism as if it were uncontroversially correct. A commitment to it requires both explicit recognition and defense. Second, this paper goes some way towards establishing the impetus behind finding viable alternatives to it.

Wellesley College

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819102000037 Published online by Cambridge University Press