

How (Not) to Disagree About What's Real¹

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1. Realism and anti-realism

Talk of 'realist' and 'anti-realist' views of various subject matters pervades philosophy. Intuitively, to be a realist about some items²—the *xs*—is to hold that those items are 'out there in the world'. In the metaphysician's idiom, real items are 'part of worldly structure' (Sider 2011), or 'members of the inventory of the world' (Broad 1923; Voltolini 2006). To be an anti-realist, by contrast, is to hold that the *xs* are 'not really out there': they are 'mere appearances' or 'shadows cast by thought or language' (Wright 1992; Blackburn 1993; Fine 2001). These are all metaphors, but I take it that the distinction they gloss is a familiar one: some things are real, others are not.

The distinction between real and unreal is intuitive and widespread. It presents in ordinary contexts: people disagree about whether ghosts are real. It presents in scientific contexts: during the 19th century, physicists introduced the idea that some items called 'fields' are part of the real structure of the world. And it obviously presents in philosophical contexts: philosophers persistently debate the reality of items such as numbers, moral reasons, possible worlds, and so on. That realism is so variously applicable does not require thinking that all real things exist in just the same way; a commitment to both mathematical and organic realism, for example, does not demand the further belief that the neighborhood cats and the natural numbers share the same mode of existence. Intuitively, realism about both is compatible with the thought that numbers exist abstractly, while the neighborhood cats enjoy some form of physical existence. The realist's commitment is rather just that both are 'out there'. Both are *real*.³

Providing a more precise, philosophically respectable statement of the realism/anti-realism distinction is a task for metaphysics. The sort of statement I am after in this paper—a 'canonical statement', if you like—should amount to a metaphysical account of the intuitive distinction. A metaphysical account is not a conceptual analysis. In looking to state the realism/anti-realism distinction, I am not looking to offer a statement of the *actual content* of disagreements about what's real; it may well be that the concept <real> that is expressed in such disagreements is a primitive one that admits of no analysis in terms of more basic concepts. My aim is rather to search for a theoretical statement that captures reasonably well the intuitive distinction, and is viable for use in giving precise statements of the commitments of realist and anti-realist views as they occur in metaphysics.⁴ As is perhaps already

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² In this paper, I use 'item' in a very general way to cover different types: objects, properties, facts, concepts, etc. are all items in my sense.

³ Following Dummett (1982) and Wright (1988; 1992), I am treating realism and anti-realism as local views; one can be a realist about the *xs* and an anti-realist about the *ys* simultaneously. I am inclined to think there exists a physical reality out there, populated by physical items such as physical particles and fields, as well as physical properties and facts. I am equally inclined to think there is no comic reality out there to be discovered—no distinctively comic properties or facts. More generally, I take it that we would like to pick and choose, subject matter by subject matter, which items to be realists about. But I should address a prominent usage of 'realism' and 'anti-realism' that does seem to treat them as global views. As I see it, what philosophers are up to when they characterize themselves as 'realists' or 'anti-realists' without qualification is emphasizing that they take a realist view of some central and perhaps contested items, such as the core theoretical entities of science and metaphysics. Nevertheless, most philosophical 'realists' are anti-realist about *something*: it is certainly not a part of the standard 'realist' outlook defended by Sider and others that one has to be a realist about possible worlds, about fictional entities, about phenomenal properties, or about moral facts (not to mention more exotic items, such as Meinongian subsistents), just to name a few examples. Global anti-realism, for its part, seems hardly intelligible (though see Dasgupta (MS)).

⁴ Cf. Dunaway (2022): 363 for similar comments. An analogy may be helpful: I take it that the technical notion of *extension* is a reasonable (if perhaps ultimately naive) candidate for an account of the intuitive notion of *meaning* in semantic theory, but it would be odd to assume that people not versed in philosophy, or who lived before theorists popularized the notion of extension, were expressing the concept <extension> when they talked about meaning; it seems more plausible to think of <extension> as a theoretical concept introduced to improve upon—by precisifying and regimenting—the ordinary notion of meaning for the purpose

apparent, my guiding metaphor for thinking about this distinction will be the idea that real items are ‘out there’. This metaphor is well-represented in the philosophical literature; witness e.g. Ted Sider avowing his realist commitments:

A certain “knee-jerk realism” is an unargued presupposition of this book. [...] According to the picture, the point of human inquiry—or a very large chunk of it anyway, a chunk that includes physics—is to *conform* itself to the world, rather than to *make* the world. The world is “out there”, and our job is to wrap our minds around it. (Sider 2011: 18)

and Gideon Rosen characterizing the realist outlook:

Our discourse about X concerns a domain of fact that is *out there*. These facts obtain *anyway*, regardless of what we may think. When all goes well, inquiry in the disputed area *discovers* what is *already* there, rather than *constituting* or *constructing* its object. Successful thought amounts to the *detection* of something real, as opposed to a *projection* onto the real of our own peculiar or subjective perspective. (Rosen 1994: 278)

Similar descriptions occur in Wright (1992) and Fine (2001), among others.⁵

Broadly speaking, there is one way to be a realist about the *xs*, but two ways to be an anti-realist. Distinguish between *skeptical anti-realism* and *vindicatory anti-realism*. Skeptical and vindicatory anti-realists both deny that the *xs* are real, but differ in their engagement with *discourse* that purports to be about the *xs*. By way of example, consider *comic discourse* (Wright 1992)—discourse about what’s funny. The skeptical comic anti-realist nearly never speaks in terms of distinctively comic vocabulary like ‘funny’. When she does, it is only to utter claims of the following ‘negative’ kind:

‘That’s not funny, but it’s not un-funny either.’

‘Nothing is funny.’

‘There is no property of being funny.’

‘There are no comic facts.’

The skeptical comic anti-realist has effectively abandoned comic discourse; the only occasions on which she uses comic terms at all is to reaffirm that abandonment, or to provide her reason for doing so: that she takes comic items to be unreal. The vindicatory comic anti-realist, on the other hand, continues to participate in comic discourse, and freely utters ‘positive’ comic claims. Despite denying that ‘funniness’ is in any way part of reality, she is willing to say, e.g. when watching a comedy film which makes her laugh, that

‘*Airplane!* is funny’.

of developing an effective semantic theory. I understand the various proposals for understanding the realism/anti-realism distinction that I consider in this paper as theoretical proposals in a similar vein.

⁵ More recent work in metaphysics has often glossed a realist view of the *xs* as the view that the *xs* are ‘worldly’, which is standardly contrasted with ‘deflationary’ views, or occasionally a view of the *xs* as being ‘merely representational’. A recent locus of this sort of talk has been debates about how to understand metaphysical grounding—see Raven (2015), Dasgupta (2017), and Rubenstein (2024). A particularly acute example of the worldly/representational contrast can be found in Rubenstein & Gómez Sánchez’ (forthcoming) discussion of logical atomism. I take characterizations of real items as ‘worldly’ to express, in compacted form, the same metaphor expressed by ‘out there in the world’.

She may also be willing to disagree with others' claims about what is and isn't funny, and so on.⁶

This paper is concerned primarily with vindicatory anti-realism. An adequate statement of the realism/anti-realism distinction should be able to accommodate the possibility of being a vindicatory anti-realist. Nevertheless, philosophical work of the last few decades has shown that it is difficult to see how to do that. In short, the problem is that straightforward statements of the realism/anti-realism distinction—most prominently a simple existential account, on which disagreement about whether the *xs* are real consists in disagreement about whether the *xs* *exist*—are undermined by various 'minimal platitudes' about central terms in metaphysical disputes (Wright 1992; Rosen 1994; Fine 2001; Dreier 2004). Via application of minimal platitudes to first-order claims (e.g. '*Airplane!* is funny') in a discourse about contested items, vindicatory anti-realists are able to produce non-committal mimics of paradigmatically realist claims. The availability of these mimics to the anti-realist precludes easy statements of her disagreement with the realist: if both sides are willing to say *p* about contested items, willingness to say *p* clearly cannot function as what distinguishes their metaphysical positions. Acceptance of minimal platitudes ('minimalism') thus threatens the *intelligibility* of straightforward accounts of the realism/anti-realism distinction.

I'll say all this more slowly in §2. For the moment, the important thing to observe is that an essential criterion for a satisfactory account of the realism/anti-realism distinction is that it actually identify a clear point of disagreement between realists and anti-realists—in other words, an adequate account must avoid failures of intelligibility:

Intelligibility failures: An account of the distinction suffers an intelligibility failure if it fails to provide a claim about the *xs* that realists will affirm and anti-realists will deny.

Avoiding intelligibility failures has arguably been the main aim of work on realism and anti-realism over the last several decades. Philosophers have developed a number of sophisticated strategies for rescuing the distinction from minimalist undermining. But intelligibility failures are only one of several pitfalls threatening accounts of the realism/anti-realism distinction. In particular, I believe that an adequate account should also avoid two more⁷ distinctive problems:

Targeting failures: An account of the distinction suffers a targeting failure if its subject matter is not a metaphysical disagreement about what the world is like, but instead some other subject matter.

Neutrality failures: An account of the distinction suffers a neutrality failure if it defines realism and anti-realism in a way that precludes a conceivable view about what is or is not real.

In contrast to intelligibility failures, targeting failures and neutrality failures are far less discussed. The most common form of targeting failure (and so the main form I will focus on here) happens when accounts meant to capture what it is to disagree about whether the *xs* are real—i.e. what the *world* is like—are formulated in terms of claims about *discourse* about the *xs*—i.e. what our linguistic practices are like. In their worst form, targeting failures result in accounts that inappropriately define what it is for some items to be real *in terms* of facts concerning discourse about those items, which wrongly makes realism and anti-realism views about how we speak, rather than views about the world.

⁶ Vindicatory anti-realism is pervasive, especially among philosophers. Moral anti-realists continue to call various events 'right' and 'wrong'; modal anti-realists continue to make claims about what is and isn't possible; mathematical anti-realists are willing to say the number of people in the room; fictive anti-realists are comfortable asserting that Smaug is a character created by Tolkien.

⁷ Perhaps there are other general desiderata that constrain an adequate account of the distinction—Dunaway (2022), for example, argues that an adequate account must respect the intuition that realism about the *xs* is compatible with reductionism about the *xs*. I won't pursue issues of reductionism here.

Neutrality failures occur in two ways. The first way is when an account of the realism/anti-realism distinction is overly restrictive. For example, an account according to which holding that the *xs* are real consists in holding that the *xs* are fundamental suffers a neutrality failure, because it precludes conceivable views (Fine 2001, 2009; Schaffer 2009; cf. Rubenstein 2024 and Psillos 2005) that say there are real non-fundamental items.⁸ The second way is when an account of the distinction is spelled out in terms of some notion that *itself* can be a subject matter of disagreement between realists and anti-realists. For example, an account according to which holding that the *xs* are real consists in holding that there are laws of nature governing *xs* would obscure the conceivable view of a nomic skeptic who denies that there are laws but still holds that there are real (lawless) objects and events. Wedding being real to being law-governed would inappropriately limit our ability to state realist and anti-realist views about laws themselves.⁹

While sophisticated accounts of the realism/anti-realism distinction avoid intelligibility failures, I contend that they all nonetheless succumb to either targeting or neutrality failures. In what follows, I discuss what I take to be the leading accounts: a *truth-realization* account (Wright 1992), a family of *explanation-based* accounts, and an account in terms of the notion of *metaphysical naturalness* (Sider 2011). All of these accounts are minimalism-proof by design, but the first two suffer targeting failures, and the last suffers a neutrality failure. Therefore none of them is an adequate account of the realism/anti-realism distinction. I am aware of no other extant accounts that succeed where these fail. The upshot is that we still have no satisfactory account of how to disagree about what's real.

Here is the plan: §2 develops the minimalist threat in more detail, and shows how it undermines straightforward accounts of the realism/anti-realism distinction. §3 introduces the three sophisticated accounts I just mentioned as response strategies against minimalist undermining, and argues that they all nevertheless fail for the reasons above. §4 closes with a brief discussion of prospects for the project of developing an adequate account of the realism/anti-realism distinction in light of these results.

2. Minimalist undermining

The most straightforward way to precisify talk of what is 'out there' is as talk of what exists:

EXISTENCE. The *xs* are real iff the *xs* exist.

Call this the *existential* account. A comic anti-realist, on the existential account, is someone who holds that there are no comic properties, or perhaps that there are no comic facts (she most likely holds both).

It would be nice if we could stop here, with such a simple statement of the intuitive distinction. Unfortunately, **EXISTENCE** suffers an intelligibility failure—it fails to provide a statement that can actually distinguish realists from anti-realists. The problem comes from 'minimalism',¹⁰ which consists in a series of 'platitudes' like the following:

Disquotation: $p \leftrightarrow 'p'$ is true.

Correspondence: $p \leftrightarrow$ it is a fact that p .

⁸ To elaborate, the point is not that one has to be a realist about non-fundamental items, but rather that this amounts to a *substantive* view about what's real. Holding that the only real items are fundamental items is like holding that the only real items are physical items, or that the only real items are concrete items; such claims, if they are true, are surely not *definitional* truths, but rather substantive metaphysical truths. There are intelligible views in substantive disagreement with them—the view that there are real non-fundamental items, the view that there are real non-physical items, and the view that there are real abstract items respectively. In looking to state the realism/anti-realism distinction itself, we are after an account that could be used to state *any* of these views. An account of the distinction should itself be neutral on which metaphysics is the right one.

⁹ Thanks to Milan Mossé for discussion; my remarks here should not be taken as representative of his own views.

¹⁰ See Wright (1992): ch. 1 §4, ch. 2 §1; Rosen (1994): 281–283; Fine (2001): 1–8, §4; Dreier (2004).

Propertyhood: $Fa \rightarrow$ there is a property of F -ness.

Representation: ' p ' is true $\leftrightarrow p$ represents the facts.

Truthmaking: ' p ' is true $\leftrightarrow$ ' p ' is true because of the fact that p .

These minimal platitudes license the introduction of 'minimal analogues' of various metaphysically heavyweight notions (*truth*, *fact*, *property*, *representation*, *truthmaker*) from allegedly 'metaphysically innocent' first-order claims. Users of minimal analogues often emphasize that the analogues should be interpreted as equally metaphysically innocent to the first-order claims they are introduced from by emphasizing their inferential roles over any referential aspects they might be thought to have. For example, users of the disquotational schema will standardly emphasize that an utterance of ' p ' is true' adds no further metaphysically committal content to an utterance of ' p ',¹¹ and users of the propertyhood introduction rule will emphasize that an utterance of 'There is a property of F -ness (that a has)' adds no further metaphysically committal content to an utterance of ' a is F '.¹²

Vindicatory anti-realists can use minimal analogues to mimic realist claims. Of course, the vindicatory anti-realist's aim is not to pretend to be a realist. Rather, she wants to insist that there is a perfectly acceptable, minimal sense in which she can utter certain sentences without thereby being committed to the reality of strange items. Where the realist holds that p (regarded as metaphysically committal), she holds that p (regarded as metaphysically innocent). But now there is an obvious problem of how to distinguish those with realist views from those with anti-realist ones, if they are willing to make what are apparently the same claims about a contested subject matter. As Kit Fine expresses the worry, the anti-realist's minimal analogues will be

in the nature of imposters—with all of the usual trappings of factuality but none of the substance. They will be like "zombies" that display all of the outwards signs of consciousness without themselves being conscious. But then how are we to distinguish between the two? At least in the case of the zombies, we can perhaps tell from our own experience what it is like to be conscious. But in the present case, there would appear to be no special vantage point from which we could draw a distinction between what is real and what is merely a "shadow" cast by our language or thought. There is no stepping behind the putative facts to see what is really there. (Fine 2001, 12)

The "special vantage point" Fine mentions is a way of precisely stating the difference between realism and anti-realism. Minimalism shrouds our sight of that lighthouse—we are left out to sea.¹³

Let's make the problem more concrete. Recall that both the comic realist and the vindicatory comic anti-realist are willing to say

(1) *Airplane!* is funny.

What do they disagree about? Well, perhaps the anti-realist holds that

¹¹ Cf. e.g. Horwich (1990) and Field (2001): ch. 4-5 on deflationism about truth.

¹² Cf. e.g. Schiffer (2003) on 'pleonastic' inferences.

¹³ Let me emphasize that the problem is not that the realist and the vindicatory anti-realist *in fact* take on the same commitments. To hold that view would be to regard disagreements about what's real as fundamentally confused. Nor is the problem that the realist and anti-realist fail to produce contentful assertions, and therefore fail to disagree about anything at all. These quietist positions are not mine. The problem is rather that minimalism undermines a straightforward formulation of the realism/anti-realism distinction: although we should not interpret realists and anti-realists as asserting the same *content* about a contested subject matter, minimalism makes it the case that they will nevertheless utter most of the same *sentences*. We would like to identify a sentence they are *not* both willing to say, which can be used to distinguish their views. By doing so, we could attribute some substantive, determinate content to each of them, and adequately represent their disagreement.

(2) There are no comic properties.

But on reflection, that cannot be the right way to state her disagreement with the realist, because (2) is immediately undermined by the propertyhood introduction platitude. Using the minimal analogue of *property*, a comic anti-realist is free to say

(3) There is a property of being funny.

In doing so, she appears to identify a comic property, undermining (2). Of course, as an anti-realist, she will insist that (3) is not intended in a committal way (and for reasons of charity, we should believe her), but her willingness to utter (3) is directly incompatible with **EXISTENCE**. If the *xs* are taken to be comic properties, it is not true that realists and anti-realists about the *xs* can be distinguished based on whether they say the *xs* exist—both will say they do.

We get the same result if we take the *xs* to be comic facts. From (1), the correspondence platitude permits an inference to

(4) It is a fact that *Airplane!* is funny.

This undermines the comic anti-realist claim that there are no comic facts. Moreover, we can infer from (1) via the disquotational schema that

(5) '*Airplane!* is funny' is true.

And from the representation platitude it follows that

(6) '*Airplane!* is funny' represents the facts.

And from the truthmaking platitude that

(7) '*Airplane!* is funny' is true because of the fact that *Airplane!* is funny.

Thus the vindictory comic anti-realist is able to mimic (in a minimal sense) all of the paradigmatic realist claims: she is permitted to speak of comic *properties*, comic *facts*, comic *truths*, and she can even mimic realist explanatory talk of comic facts grounding comic truths.¹⁴ **EXISTENCE** is therefore an inadequate account of the distinction. So too is an account that says comic realists and anti-realists disagree about whether claims about comic items are true, and an account that says they disagree about whether comic truths are made true by comic facts. All of these accounts fail to identify a claim that realists and the vindictory anti-realists can actually disagree about.

3. Response strategies

The basic existential account of the realism/anti-realism distinction is clearly inadequate. It fails to provide a statement that clearly distinguishes what realists and vindictory anti-realists are willing to claim about contested items, and therefore suffers an intelligibility failure.

As a response to minimalist undermining, philosophers have developed sophisticated, minimalism-proof accounts of the realism/anti-realism distinction. In this section, I consider what I take to be the three predominant sorts of account in the literature. Each account privileges a particular notion

¹⁴ On minimalist mimics of truthmaking claims see Horwich (1990): ch. 7 §35, Wright (1992): 26-27, and Rosen (1998): 396.

as central to perspicuous statements of the realism/anti-realism distinction. The three notions are *the metaphysical nature of truth*, *explanation*, and *metaphysical naturalness*.

I argue that all of these accounts fail: *truth-realization* accounts and *explanation-based* accounts both suffer targeting failures insofar as they inappropriately define what it is to be real in terms of claims about *discourses* about contested items—the behavior of a discourse’s truth predicate, in the first case, and standards of best explanation, in the second. These accounts resultantly make the facts about what’s real inappropriately depend on the facts about our contingent linguistic practices. They fail because they make what’s real *up to us*. The *naturalness* account defended by Sider (2011), for its part, avoids this problem, but instead suffers a neutrality failure insofar as it obscures an intuitively conceivable anti-realist view about naturalness itself.

3.1 Metaphysical accounts of truth

If we accept minimalism, we must accept that any contested discourse includes true claims. Both the comic realist and the vindictory comic anti-realist will say that *Airplane!* is funny, and that it’s true that *Airplane!* is funny. Say that a discourse is *minimally alethic* just in case it has a predicate *T* that accords with the basic inferential role of a truth predicate—it embeds within negations and conditionals, and it “coincides in normative force” with ‘warrantably assertible’, in the sense that a reason to think a statement is *T* is a reason to think that statement is warrantably assertible, and vice versa (we still permit that *T* and ‘warrantably assertible’ may differ in extension).¹⁵ The sort of discourses we are interested in are minimally alethic discourses—comic discourse, physical discourse, mathematical discourse, moral discourse, etc.

Even if we assume that every contested discourse is minimally alethic, Wright points out that we can introduce a distinction between different *ways* for statements to be true, where some ways are intuitively realist and some are intuitively anti-realist. With such a distinction in place, discourses can be sorted into those that involve realist truth and those that involve anti-realist truth.¹⁶ In his words:

there is no reason to expect that the minimal platitudes will constrain their interpretation to within uniqueness. A *variety* of predicates may qualify as truth predicates, and we have to be receptive to the possibility that the truth predicates across different regions of discourse may differ in important respects. (Wright 1992: 75)

On this way of thinking, realism and anti-realism about the *xs* amount to competing views about what kind of truth discourse about the *xs* involves.

Note that the relevant contrast here is *not* between ‘minimal’ and ‘substantial’ truth. We are accepting that *all* contested discourses have minimal truth, just by having a predicate with the right role in the linguistic practice. The contrast is rather between different ways truth might be *realized*—different properties that are eligible to be picked out by a truth predicate. Accordingly, accepting Wright’s strategy requires accepting that there is more to truth than merely minimal truth; it requires giving substantive metaphysical accounts—both realist and anti-realist—of the *nature* of truth.¹⁷ On the view at hand, the property of truth picked out by a truth predicate is a *multiply realizable* property, one that can correspond to different determinations with respect to different discourses.¹⁸

Following Dummett (1982) and Putnam (1977; 1981), Wright understands anti-realist truth properties to be “evidentially constrained” properties, such as Putnam’s idealized warranted assertibility, or Wright’s

¹⁵ Wright (1992): 18, 24–25, 72

¹⁶ Ibid.: 77–82.

¹⁷ Thus Wright’s view of truth requires rejecting alethic deflationism. That truth has a substantial nature—in fact not one, but multiple—is an essential element of the proposal. This demand may already seem suboptimal; as Field (1982) and Devitt (1991) have argued, whether deflationism is true seems orthogonal to our ability to understand disagreements between realists and anti-realists—but this is no concern for Wright, who argues (ibid.: ch. 1 §3) that deflationism is incoherent. While I don’t think his argument succeeds, I will not address that here.

¹⁸ Cf. Wright (1996): §3.

own ‘superassertibility’ (roughly a statement’s surviving arbitrarily close scrutiny).¹⁹ He is less clear on what realist truth might be, but I presume something like the ‘classical’ correspondence picture of representational items referring to and being made true by facts (with a suitably constrained correspondence relation²⁰) would suffice. More minimally, he may just have in mind any kind of evidentially unconstrained property eligible for serving as the referent of a truth predicate. The basic idea of the account is in any case reasonably clear: realist varieties of truth are, in Putnam’s (1977) phrase, “radically non-epistemic”; a statement apt for realist truth could be false even if part of an “operationally ideal” theory by outstripping all evidence we could potentially gather.²¹

We can state the general truth-realization account as follows, for a truth predicate T in a discourse D about the x s:

TRUTH-REALIZATION. The x s are real iff T_D refers to an evidentially unconstrained property.

Intuitively, whether truth in D is evidentially constrained (or not) is a matter of whether the x s are really out there (or not). But now a question arises: what makes it the case that a discourse’s truth predicate picks out the particular realization of truth it does? Plausibly, what property a truth predicate T refers to in a given discourse is dependent on the ‘use facts’ for T . For instance, a paradigmatically realist-sounding comic discourse would involve instances of people asserting and agreeing that there are comic truths that might in principle elude all comic evidence, while a paradigmatically anti-realist-sounding comic discourse would involve instances of people asserting and agreeing that comic statements are true in virtue of their assertion being warranted in a context, i.e. that they are true-because-justified, rather than justified-because-true. In the first case, the natural interpretation is that comic T refers to an evidentially constrained property. In the second, the natural interpretation is that comic T refers to an evidentially unconstrained property. Actual use of T makes a difference in metasemantically determining T ’s reference.

If the pool of eligible referents for a truth predicate consists in the set of properties that obey the minimal constraints on realizing truth, then both ‘realist’ and ‘anti-realist’ properties are available as potential referents for the truth predicate in any truth-apt discourse. The pool of eligibles is indiscriminating; it includes both evidentially constrained and unconstrained properties. Given that, one would expect the tie-breaker in reference-determination to be the use facts. But if this is the case, then *we* determine, by our practices, which discourses have which kinds of truth. And if we were to accept **TRUTH-REALIZATION**, it would follow that *we* determine the facts about whether the x s are real. But surely those facts aren’t up to us.

I think the issue can be seen most clearly when formulated as the *problem of neighboring discourses*. Suppose (as seems intuitively correct) that comic anti-realism is true. To claim this, according to the truth-realization account, is to claim that the truth predicate of actual comic discourse refers to an evidentially constrained property (say superassertibility). That’s to say, actual conversations about what’s funny are not governed by actual norms that license assertions like

(8) There are probably many facts about what’s funny that humanity will never discover.

or

(9) We could all be radically mistaken about what’s funny, even at the ideal limit of comic inquiry.

¹⁹ Putnam (1981): 49-56 (cf. Putnam (1990): 19-31); Wright (1992): 48.

²⁰ See Lewis (1984).

²¹ Putnam (1977): 485. For discussion of this idea, see Maudlin (2015).

But there will be some mostly-identical possible discourse—call it *comic* discourse*—that we could have spoken, which is governed by such ‘realist’ norms, and where such assertions are commonplace. We could have spoken comic* discourse, instead of comic discourse, and if we had, ‘true’ in our discourse would have referred not to superassertibility, but to some heavyweight, realist truth property. But if that had been the case, if we had conducted our practice like that, *we would have made comic realism true*, for it would have been the case that ‘true’ in our discourse referred to an evidentially unconstrained property.

This is obviously unacceptable. I take it to be a truism about the notion of ‘being real’ that the facts concerning what is real are not a matter of what our linguistic practices are like. We have identified a paradigmatic targeting failure.

A comparison may be helpful. Dummett’s (1982) account of the realism/anti-realism distinction also focused on truth. In his view, the proper way to characterize anti-realism about the *xs* is as the claim that discourse concerning the *xs* fails to conform to the principle of bivalence; if the *xs* are real, every statement about them is determinately true or false, independent of our capacity to find evidence for its truth/falsity. Fine (2001) objects to Dummett’s account on the following grounds:

Even in application to areas of discourse, Bivalence is not, on its own, sufficient for realism. A simple counterexample runs as follows. Suppose that an antirealist becomes completely opinionated about the given discourse: he acquires a view (for reasons internal to the discourse, though perhaps very bad ones) on the true/false answer to every particular question that might arise. He would then be committed to each instance of Bivalence, and as long as he was aware of having become completely opinionated, he would also be committed to Bivalence holding of every statement of the discourse. But it seems absurd to suppose that, on that fateful day in which the last question falls under the sway of his opinion, he is destined to become a realist. (Fine 2001: 6)

Fine’s point is that the bivalence account suffers a targeting failure. The bivalence account characterizes realism and anti-realism as views one can hold about a *discourse*, rather than about its *subject matter*. Holding that a discourse is bivalent doesn’t make it the case that one thereby holds that the items purportedly referred to by statements of that discourse are real. And if the account is formulated so as to explicitly *define* realism about the *xs* as the view that discourse about the *xs* is bivalent:

BIVALENCE. The *xs* are real iff *D* exhibits bivalence.

then it will follow that becoming sufficiently opinionated on statements in a discourse *is* sufficient for realism about that discourse’s subject matter. Fine’s opinionated anti-realist *would* become a realist, simply by making up his mind.

The root of the problem for Wright and the problem for Dummett are the same: both treat realism and anti-realism as views about the nature of *discourse* about the *xs* (in Wright’s case, its rules of use for *T*; in Dummett’s, whether its statements are bivalent), and discourses are not their subject matters. If we try to contort views about discourse concerning the *xs* into views about the reality of the *xs*, we end up attributing ourselves a manifestly implausible control over the facts about what’s real. In the bivalence case, one can control whether one is a realist just by becoming sufficiently opinionated; in the truth-realization case, we can control whether items are real just by deciding when to apply the word ‘true’.²²

²² It is worth noting that the problem of neighboring discourses only arises because we have assumed an ‘alethic pluralist’ picture on which truth may be realized differently in different discourses. While Wright assimilates Putnam’s account of truth as idealized warrant into the fold of anti-realist varieties of truth, Putnam’s view is really an ‘alethic monist’ view on which truth consists in idealized warrant for every discourse. On a monist view of truth, there is no dependence of the facts about what’s real on facts about the differing natures of truth across various discourses—no matter what the discourses are like, truth will have the same nature. This point is, however, of no help to our current project. We are interested in an account of the difference between realism and vindictory anti-realism capable of preserving their intuitive roles as *local* views. So while dropping multiple realizability in favor of

In sum, the truth-realization account fails. The general conception of the realism/anti-realism distinction it represents—one on which whether e.g. comic items are real is a matter of how we speak—cannot be correct. Whether realism about the comic is true or false is surely independent of what standards govern our discourse about comedy.

3.2 Explanation-based strategies

A different strain in the literature has attempted to fortify the realism/anti-realism distinction against minimalism by drawing explanatory distinctions.²³ The basic idea behind explanation-based accounts of the distinction is that the best explanations of truths/facts about certain subject matters demand that we actually postulate the distinctive items those truths/facts purport to concern, while the best explanations of truths/facts about other subject matters fail to make such explanatory demands. Thus comic realism is conceived of as the view that comic truths/facts are best explained by facts involving *sui generis* comic items, while comic anti-realism is conceived of as the view that comic truths/facts are not best explained by facts involving *sui generis* comic items.

The explanatory approach has taken various forms.²⁴ One example is Wright's (1992) 'wide cosmological role' account.²⁵ Let the *xs* exhibit *wide cosmological role* just in case they feature in the best explanations of facts other than or in addition to cognitive facts. Hence:

WIDE COSMOLOGICAL ROLE. The *xs* are real iff the *xs* exhibit wide cosmological role.

The motivating thought for this account is that items that are 'really out there' come into contact with more of the world than just our thoughts about them. If the *xs* are real, we should expect that they are capable of explaining more than just cognitive states such as beliefs—they should be explanatorily efficacious in realms beyond the conceptual.²⁶ In other words, Wright (as I read him) is thinking that there is a minimal sense in which we can *think about* and *refer to* the *xs*, and so there is also a minimal sense in which our true beliefs about the *xs* are *explained* by truths about the *xs*, where those truths are (minimally) made true by the (minimal) *facts* about the *xs* (via the truthmaker platitude). But all of this is

alethic monism does avoid the problem of neighboring discourses, it does not get us any closer to an adequate account of the target distinction.

²³ Proponents include Harman (1977), Wright (1992): ch. 3, 5, and Fine (2001). Dreier (2004) endorses Fine's version of this strategy as a response to minimalism.

²⁴ One form that I will not discuss here is Rosen's (1994: 310) interpretation of Williams' (2005) notion of the 'absolute conception of the world'. According to Rosen's Williamsian explanation-based account, saying that the *xs* are real amounts to saying that they "must be mentioned [...] in the best causal/explanatory account of the plurality of representations of the world." Another form that I will not discuss is Wright's (1992: ch. 3 §6, ch. 5) "cognitive command" account, according to which realism about the *xs* requires holding that disagreements about the *xs* between equally informed disputants must be explained by the attribution of a "cognitive shortcoming" to one or more disputants. My belief is that the problem I raise for explanation-based accounts here is a general one that will extend to these and any other explanation-based accounts there are.

²⁵ Wright (1992): 192.

²⁶ For more discussion of **WIDE COSMOLOGICAL ROLE**, see Rosen (1994): 311-313.

compatible with the *xs* being unreal.²⁷ While there is a minimal sense in which our beliefs about the *xs* can be explained by the *xs*, it would be a sign of unreality if the *xs* were *only* explanatorily relevant to cognitive states—the wetness of the rocks can explain not only my belief that the rocks are wet, but the lichen growing on those rocks, and my slipping and falling when I attempt to traverse them; that *Airplane!* is funny plausibly seems only capable of explaining my belief that it is.

Fine (2001) develops another influential explanation-based account in terms of metaphysical grounding.²⁸ His idea is that we take the following sorts of ‘protected statements’²⁹ (true claims about contested items embedded in attitude reports) as neutral ground between realists and anti-realists:

(10) Alice thinks (truly) that *Airplane!* is funny.

and look for a way of distinguishing realism from anti-realism in the contrasting metaphysical explanations the different parties will offer about in virtue of what truths (or facts) like (10) hold. While realists and vindicatory anti-realists about the comic can both agree that (10) is true, realists will say that the truth of (10) consists in something like Alice recognizing that *Airplane!* instantiates the property of being funny, while anti-realists may say that it consists in something like Alice having a delight-related attitude toward *Airplane!*, or some other explanation that lacks reference to funniness. Say that an item *x* can be *grounding-eliminated* if and only if it does not feature in the best metaphysical explanation of truths/facts of the form ‘*S* said/thought that *p*’, where *p* is a proposition that putatively refers to *x*. Fine’s explanation-based account can thus be formulated as

GROUNDING-ELIMINATION. The *xs* are real iff the *xs* are not grounding-eliminable.

Intuitively, thinking that *xs* are unreal amounts to thinking that truths or facts that seem to concern the *xs* are misleading; in reality, the constitutive natures of the truths or facts do not involve the *xs* at all, and reference to the *xs* is explanatorily inert.

The grounding-elimination account plausibly lurks behind some commonplace appeals to mind-dependence when characterizing anti-realism.³⁰ Consider e.g. Street’s (2008) Humean constructivism about reasons. On Street’s view, it’s true that there are reasons, but this truth is metaphysically explained in terms of agents’ *judgments* about what reasons they have.³¹ As Street emphasizes, judgments about reasons do not require that there *are* reasons. Consider two valuing

²⁷ Compare Wright’s (1992: 178–182) discussion of Dummett’s (1973: ch. 14) view of reference to abstract objects. Wright interprets Dummett as holding not that reference to abstracta fails, but that “singular reference, as applied to pure abstract singular terms, is somehow thin and minimal, and consequently insufficient to warrant the kind of realism about mathematical objects typically associated with platonistic philosophies of mathematics” (1992: 179). Accordingly, “there is no *linguistically unmediated* cognitive contact with abstract objects: abstract objects can, in general, impinge upon us only as the referents of understood abstract singular terms” (ibid.: 180). Generalizing, Wright suggests that

Like pure abstract objects, the states of affairs purportedly depicted by merely minimally true sentences do not seem to *do* anything except answer to the demands of our minimally true thoughts. The irresistible metaphor is that pure abstract objects, conceived as by Fregean platonism, and the states of affairs to which, in accordance with the Correspondence Platitude, merely minimally true sentences correspond, are no more than *shadows* cast by the syntax of our discourse. (ibid.: 181–182)

Contrast this with a familiar argument for mathematical realism from apparently ‘distinctively mathematical’ explanations of certain physical situations (see Lange (2013) for general discussion). To mention a case Wright (1992: 198–199) considers, it is plausibly “because a prime number of tiles have been delivered [...] that a contractor has trouble in using them to cover, without remainder, a rectangular bathroom floor, even if he has never heard of prime numbers and never thought about how the area of a rectangle is determined.” If this observation stood up under scrutiny, it would be a mark in favor of mathematical objects exhibiting wide cosmological role. Similarly, arguments that moral items are real because they are causally efficacious (Sturgeon 1984) can be understood as arguments that moral items exhibit wide cosmological role.

²⁸ Fine (2001), §6.

²⁹ This label is Dreier’s (2004: 34).

³⁰ See e.g. Devitt (1991), Psillos (1999), Miller (2003), Street (2010), Cameron (2008).

³¹ Street (2008): 223; in Street’s formulation, “the fact that *X* is a reason to *Y* for agent *A* is constituted by the fact that the judgment that *X* is a reason to *Y* (for *A*) withstands scrutiny from the standpoint of *A*’s other judgments about reasons.

creatures, one which attempts to promote its own survival (it values its survival), and one which attempts to prevent its own survival (it disvalues its survival); Street says that

When the first creature judged that its own survival was good, and the second creature judged that its own survival was bad, the first was not recognizing some normative truth that the second was somehow missing. The first creature *survived*, of course, but this isn't because its judgment was *true*, but rather simply because the creature tended to do what promoted its survival. The second creature, in contrast, *didn't* survive, but that's not because it failed to be sensitive to any normative reality; it's rather simply because that creature sought to destroy itself and succeeded. (Street 2008: 221)

In other words, it was possible for these two creatures to make value judgments about their reasons for action without there being any reasons. According to Street's constructivism, it is instead the case that there are reasons *in virtue* of value judgments about what reasons there are: the true claim that

(11) There are reasons.

is, broadly speaking, metaphysically explained by the fact that

(12) Agents judge that there are reasons.

where, crucially, the metaphysical explanation for (12) does not itself make any reference to reasons. So while Street herself characterizes constructivism as an anti-realist view because it treats reasons as mind-dependent,³² her view is easily accounted for in terms of grounding-elimination. An account on which being mind-dependent is sufficient for being unreal is, for its part, fairly implausible—such a view suffers neutrality failures due to the existence of a number of views that treat mind-dependent items as real, such as Schaffer's (2009) neo-Aristotelian ontological permissivism, creationism about fictional entities (Thomasson 1999; Voltolini 2009), and generative grounding idealism, the analogue of generative grounding physicalism on which all non-physical facts are ultimately dependent on fundamental mental facts (cf. Chalmers 2019).³³ That **GROUNDING-ELIMINATION** can vindicate the intuitions behind mind-dependence views is a point in its favor.

In §2, I noted that minimalism extends to explanatory language. The truthmaking platitude permits vindicatory anti-realists to say, for any true *p*, that *p* is made true by the *fact* that *p*. Proponents of explanation-based accounts need to clarify why it is that this doesn't already undermine their views. The issue is particularly salient for accounts in terms of metaphysical explanation, like Fine's, but I think it's relevant to various other proposals as well. Consider the vindicatory comic anti-realist who claims that the standup comic's joke made her laugh—it might be thought that this is sufficient for wide cosmological role after all, if it's possible to characterize laughter as a merely physical process absent of cognitive aspects (consider the laughter of babies). Why doesn't minimalist explanatory talk undermine explanation-based accounts generally? If we can say that the fact that *Airplane!* is funny figures in the explanation of Alice's

³² Street (2010): 370.

³³ To spell out these examples: Schaffer holds that reality has a rich structure, comprising many ontological strata, from low-level fundamental physical entities, to mind-independent abstracta such as fictional entities, but he does not treat the latter as unreal in virtue of their mind-dependence (in fact, he seems to think that claims to their unreality only come out true insofar as those claims are interpreted as quantifier domain restrictions upon a vast multitude of items of all varieties, including mind-dependent items (ibid., 360-361), which suggests that he conceives of absolute reality as the *unrestricted* domain of items). 'Creationism' about fictional entities is the name for mind-dependent realism about fictional entities specifically. Grounding idealism is the analogue of grounding physicalism, the view that all non-physical facts are ultimately grounded in physical facts (Dasgupta 2014; Schaffer 2021; Rubenstein forthcoming; Pautz forthcoming). On the generativist picture of grounding (Rubenstein 2024), grounded items are just as real as the grounds that produce them; understanding grounding idealism as generative thus renders it compatible with realism about mind-dependent items (i.e. everything non-fundamental)—as Chalmers (2019: 592) puts the point, the realist idealist holds that "[t]he physical world really exists out there, independently of our observations; it just has a surprising nature."

true belief that it is, or that it causes her to laugh, haven't we rendered unintelligible the explanatory boundaries the proposals at hand draw?

No—but only because explanation-based accounts appeal to a notion of *best* explanation. It is available to the proponent of **WIDE COSMOLOGICAL ROLE** to say that, while there may be a minimal sense in which a joke's being funny causally explains laughter, the *best* causal explanation of laughter either does not involve the property of being funny, or involves it in a cognitively mediated way. And it is available to the proponent of **GROUNDING-ELIMINATION** to say that, while there may be in a minimal sense in which Alice's true belief that *Airplane!* is funny is explained by the fact that *Airplane!* is funny, the *best* metaphysical explanation of her true belief is the fact that she tokens a delight-related attitude toward *Airplane!*. The appeal to best explanation is an essential element of explanation-based strategies generally, as that appeal is what permits them to avoid minimalist undermining.

But it is precisely this appeal to best explanation that creates trouble for explanation-based accounts. These accounts face a dilemma: either (a) the notion of best explanation they appeal to is that of a worldly productive relation (what I'll call 'ontic explanation'³⁴) that undergirds correct explanatory claims, or (b) the notion of explanation they appeal to is a deflationary notion of explanation—roughly *explanation according to our standards of best explanation*. If the former, the realism/anti-realism distinction is presupposed, because the accounts appeal to a notion of 'real' or 'worldly' explanation. If the latter, the accounts face the problem of neighboring discourses, because standards of best explanation are discourse-internal, and therefore up to us.

The notion of ontic explanation I reference here is familiar from the literature on metaphysical explanation. Some theorists (e.g. Schaffer 2009, 2016; Audi 2012; Trogdon 2013) think of grounding as a worldly relation connecting either facts or entities—more fundamental facts/entities *generate* or *produce* derivative ones. As Schaffer (2016) and Rubenstein (2024) discuss, an ontic conception of grounding is often glossed as 'metaphysical causation', due to the fact that the ontic picture of explanation is more widely regarded as intuitive in the causal case.³⁵ Intuitively, the notion of 'ontic' explanation in both the causal and metaphysical cases is just a notion of *real* explanation—it is explanation 'out there in the world'; explanatory claims on the part of theorizers are correct or incorrect insofar as they successfully or unsuccessfully *conform* to the real explanatory structure.

Turn back to **WIDE COSMOLOGICAL ROLE**. Either the notion of best explanation that appears in the definition of 'wide cosmological role' is an ontic notion—that of causal relations out there in the world that 'correct' causal explanations track—or it is a deflationary notion. To interpret 'best explanation' as 'ontic causal explanation' would be to hold that comic items are unreal because a correct theory of the *real* causal facts would say that comic items are causal-explanatorily inert. But this interpretation of **WIDE COSMOLOGICAL ROLE** straightforwardly presupposes realism about causal explanation. *A fortiori*, it presupposes the realism/anti-realism distinction, and therefore cannot be an adequate account of that distinction.

To interpret 'best explanation' as 'best explanation according to our standards', meanwhile, would be to hold that comic items are unreal because our standards of best explanation license us to hold that they are causal-explanatorily inert. But on this interpretation of **WIDE COSMOLOGICAL ROLE**, it is in part because of the explanatory standards we accept that comic anti-realism is true. For suppose that comic anti-realism is true: in actual discourse about the comic, we accept that comic items can only explain cognitive states, and are otherwise causal-explanatorily inert. But there will be some mostly-identical possible discourse, *comic* discourse*, that we could have spoken, where the standards of best explanation are such that we would be licensed to accept that comic items can explain further states of affairs, such as physical processes like laughter, in a cognitively unmediated way. We could have spoken *comic** discourse, instead of comic discourse, and if we had, the best explanations of certain non-cognitive states

³⁴ Kovacs (2017) uses the term 'production' to pick out this notion; elsewhere (e.g. Audi 2012) it is sometimes called 'determination'.

³⁵ Dasgupta (2017) offers ways of resisting the ontic view of both grounding and causation. Kovacs (2017) argues that there is reason to doubt that the relevant ontic relations are guaranteed to be genuinely explanatory.

of affairs would involve reference to comic items. But if that had been the case, if we had conducted our practice like that, *we would have made comic realism true*, for it would have been the case that comic items did in fact exhibit a wide cosmological role. In the relevant, deflationary sense of ‘explanation’, comic items would have been explanatorily efficacious.

Now turn to **GROUNDING-ELIMINATION**. Either the notion of best explanation that appears in the definition of ‘grounding-elimination’ is an ontic notion—that of grounding relations out there in the world that ‘correct’ metaphysical explanations track—or it is a deflationary notion. To interpret ‘best metaphysical explanation’ as ‘ontic grounding explanation’ would be to hold that comic items are unreal because a correct theory of the *real* grounding facts would say that comic items are grounding-eliminable. But this interpretation of **GROUNDING-ELIMINATION** straightforwardly presupposes realism about metaphysical explanation. *A fortiori*, it presupposes the realism/anti-realism distinction, and therefore cannot be an adequate account of that distinction.

To interpret ‘best metaphysical explanation’ as ‘best metaphysical explanation according to our standards’, meanwhile, would be to hold that comic items are unreal because our standards of best explanation license us to hold that they are metaphysical-explanatorily inert. But on this interpretation of **GROUNDING-ELIMINATION**, it is in part because of the explanatory standards we accept that comic anti-realism is true. For suppose that comic anti-realism is true: in actual discourse about the comic, we accept that the apparent reference to comic items in protected statements like (10) can be metaphysically explained away. But there will be some mostly-identical possible discourse, *comic* discourse*, that we could have spoken, where the standards of best explanation are such that we would be licensed to accept e.g. that the correct metaphysical explanation of why Alice thinks that *Airplane!* is funny *does* make reference to the property of being funny. We could have spoken comic* discourse, instead of comic discourse, and if we had, the best metaphysical explanations of protected comic statements would involve reference to comic items. But if that had been the case, if we had conducted our practice like that, *we would have made comic realism true*, for it would have been the case that comic items were not in fact grounding-eliminable.

As I said a moment ago, this dilemma is perfectly general. Any explanation-based account of the realism/anti-realism distinction will face it. As such, any explanation-based account of the distinction will turn out either circular or susceptible to the problem of neighboring discourses. We should therefore reject explanation-based accounts.

3.3. Naturalness

I will finally discuss an account of the realism/anti-realism distinction in terms of the notion of *metaphysical naturalness*. The account I have in mind derives from Sider’s (2011) naturalness-based account of what it is for a disagreement to be *substantive*. Sider says that issues of clarifying the difference between substantive and nonsubstantive disagreements dovetail with issues of clarifying disagreements about what’s real, and mentions the problem of minimalism along the way,³⁶ so I do not take myself to be engaging in heavily revisionary interpretation of his thinking by extending his account of substantivity to explicitly characterize realism and anti-realism. Nevertheless, I do not claim the account of the realism/anti-realism distinction that I present in this section reflects Sider’s own views exactly.

Intuitively, a disagreement is nonsubstantive when it is ‘merely verbal’. It does not turn on ‘how things are’, but on ‘how we opt to use our words’. But as Sider notes, it is difficult to show in what sense these disagreements are *about* words or concepts—for example, the intuitively nonsubstantive question of whether a protrusion from the floor of the ocean ending in an island is a mountain³⁷ does not quantify over words or concepts, and could be described as straightforwardly about the existence conditions of mountains.³⁸ Suppose that two communities, C_1 and C_2 disagree about whether such protrusions are

³⁶ Sider (2011): 45.

³⁷ Hawthorne (2006): vii.

³⁸ Sider (2011): 45. The issue is not straightforwardly about mind-dependence either; as Sider notes,

mountains or not. The question is: how can we clarify the intuitive sense in which their disagreement is substantive?

Sider's solution makes use of the notion of naturalness first introduced by Lewis (1983). While naturalness is standardly taken to be a primitive notion,³⁹ it is often motivated as a posit by association with a rich theoretical role in characterizing, among other things, objective similarity, intrinsicity and duplication, lawhood, induction, and reference-determination in metasemantics.⁴⁰ To spell out Sider's account of substantivity, we need two pieces of naturalness-related vocabulary. First, call a bit of worldly structure that is 'objectively distinguished' (i.e. is natural) one of *reality's joints*.⁴¹ Second, call a meaning *joint-carving* when it 'fits' one of reality's joints. (Following Sider, I use these terms as interconnected primitives all circling the central primitive notion of naturalness itself.) The basic idea of Sider's account of substantivity is that a question is nonsubstantive just in case (i) there are multiple candidate meanings for interpreting the contested term of the question, (ii) interpretation according to the different meanings would yield different answers to the question, and (iii) none of the candidate meanings are more joint-carving than the others.⁴² So, for example, if C_1 uses a meaning for 'mountain' according to which underwater protrusions count as mountains, and C_2 uses a meaning for 'mountain' according to which underwater protrusions do not count as mountains, and neither of their meanings is more joint-carving than the other, their disagreement about whether underwater protrusions are mountains is non-substantive.

It will be useful to introduce a second example. At one point in his discussion, Sider considers a "projectivist" semantics for aesthetic terms:

PROJECTIVISM. By uttering ' x is beautiful', a speaker, S , communicates the proposition that x is P , where the property being P is a certain physical property that is the linguistic meaning of the predicate 'is beautiful' in S 's language; being P is the linguistic meaning of 'is beautiful' because members of S 's linguistic community bear attitude A to Ps .

Suppose that disagreements between two communities about what's beautiful are not substantive—rather, whether something is beautiful is 'subjective' relative to each community, in the sense that the meaning of 'beautiful' used by each community "reflects something important" about that community.⁴³ Sider writes that

Under this semantics, aesthetic sentences are not subjective in the straightforward sense. Accordingly, they pass common tests for "objectivity". For example, sentences about beauty make mind-independent claims: beautiful mountains would still have been beautiful even if no humans had ever existed. Nevertheless, there remains a clear sense in which the aesthetic is subjective. For *which* physical properties aesthetic predicates stand for is determined by the attitudes of the speaker's community, and any attitudes are as good as any other. Even though the properties ascribed by aesthetic predicates are wholly mind-independent, response-independent, and so on, the *selection of these* features as the features to be expressed by aesthetic predicates is

The protrusion wouldn't have been *called* a 'mountain' if people had not existed, or had spoken or acted in certain ways. The linguistic fact that the sentence 'The protrusion is a mountain' is true is mind-dependent, since whether the sentence is true depends on what it means, and what it means is mind-dependent. But the same goes for every true sentence, even 'Electrons repel one another'. So the mind-dependence of the linguistic fact isn't what makes the question of whether the protrusion is a mountain nonsubstantive. (ibid.)

³⁹ Though see Gómez Sánchez (2023) for an argument that naturalness should instead be analyzed in terms of laws of nature.

⁴⁰ In addition to Lewis (1983) and Sider (2011), see Hawthorne & Dorr (2013) for an extensive discussion of naturalness' theoretical role.

⁴¹ See Sider (2011): ch. 1. Phrases like 'one of reality's joints' shouldn't be taken too seriously here—I don't assume that anything that could plausibly count as a bit of worldly structure is countable in a straightforward way.

⁴² Ibid.: 46.

⁴³ Ibid.: 57.

accomplished solely by our having the attitudes that we do. Imagine a range of linguistic communities, each with different aesthetic attitudes. The predicate ‘is beautiful’ expresses different—equally joint-carving—properties in these different linguistic communities. Where we call a mountain beautiful, speakers of another language withhold that predicate, and instead call the mountain ‘ugly’. In such cases, everyone speaks truly; no one is making a mistake. The mountain has the property B_E that is expressed in English by ‘beautiful’, and lacks the property B_O that is expressed in the other language by ‘beautiful’. The appropriateness of the language of subjectivity in this case is manifest. (Sider 2011: 58)

Here, C_1 and C_2 ’s disagreement about whether mountains are beautiful is nonsubstantive because neither community’s meaning for ‘beautiful’ is more joint-carving than the other; when C_1 calls mountains ‘beautiful’ and C_2 calls them ‘not beautiful’ (both speak truly), neither of them is ‘making a mistake’, or ‘missing out’ on some aspect of reality’s structure. Neither community’s aesthetic discourse fails to carve reality at its joints, because in this case, there is no relevant joint to be carved.

This characterization of substantivity (roughly, that substantive discourse is joint-carving discourse) naturally extends to a characterization of the realism/anti-realism distinction:

NATURALNESS. The x s are real iff discourse about the x s involves uniquely joint-carving meanings.

Intuitively, the idea here is that if a discourse does not involve uniquely joint-carving meanings, it is not capturing a distinguished aspect of reality. This is how realism and anti-realism connect to substantivity. When the x s are unreal, disagreements about them are intuitively trivial; they do not turn on substantive issues about what the world is like. For example, if different meanings of ‘funny’ are all equally joint-carving, there are no ‘real’ facts out there to decide which meaning is better for a community to use. No meaning better captures comic reality, because there is no comic reality to capture. By contrast, if comic items were real, we could expect that certain meanings of ‘funny’ would be privileged with respect to their capacity to represent comic facts in the world.

We can make a pair of interesting observations about **NATURALNESS**. On the one hand, this account *seems* to make the mistake, which I have been discussing at length, of confusing the issue of whether the x s are real with issues concerning *discourse* about the x s. On the other hand, **NATURALNESS** in fact *cannot* make this mistake: the facts about whether a given meaning is joint-carving are fully objective, and thus robustly independent of linguistic practices. This is because naturalness is, by stipulation, a fully objective notion. It is in no respect up to us whether the meanings involved in a discourse are joint-carving—that remains for the world to decide.

NATURALNESS therefore avoids targeting failures. However, it instead suffers a neutrality failure. Here is the argument, baldly put. One can be an anti-realist about naturalness, but a realist about other items. If one can be an anti-realist about naturalness without thereby being an anti-realist about everything, one can hold that there are real items without holding that there is naturalness. If one can hold that there are real items without holding that there is naturalness, naturalness is not required for realism. And if naturalness is not required for realism, it does not figure in a comprehensive explanation of the realism/anti-realism distinction.

To see why this argument runs, consider a skeptic about naturalness, who holds a view of the sort found in Dasgupta (2018). Here is how Dasgupta reasons: properties are cheap, so if there is a property of naturalness that green has and grue lacks, there will also be a disjunctively-defined property of *graturalness* that grue has and green lacks. But there is no worldly, objective *normative significance* that can break the second-order symmetry between naturalness and graturalness (it’s mysterious what such worldly normativity could even be), so natural properties, meanings, and concepts have no special feature that makes them uniquely good for theorizing with in comparison to gratural properties, meanings, and

concepts.⁴⁴ Dasguptan skepticism about naturalness thus turns out to be skepticism about the claim that naturalness is uniquely suited to guide theorizing—i.e. that theorizing with natural concepts is objectively *better* than theorizing with non-natural concepts. This is the “problem of missing value”.⁴⁵

There is a complication here. The realist about naturalness may opt to use the term ‘natural’ (and the related vocabulary of ‘joints’) just to *mean* a property that is, among other things, by its nature objectively guiding. Call this notion *thick naturalness*. Alternatively, one could think of naturalness just as a descriptive metaphysical posit, without assuming that natural joints are objectively guiding. What stipulative choice we make here when deciding how to use ‘natural’ effects how to formulate the Dasguptan view, for if everyone agrees that by ‘natural’, we mean something objectively guiding (thick naturalness), then Dasgupta should be interpreted as a skeptic about naturalness as such, whereas if we opt to use the thin meaning, Dasgupta can say that there *is* naturalness—(thin) naturalness is just one more property after all, and properties are cheap!—but go on to deny that naturalness is objectively guiding.⁴⁶ That is, if we mean ‘thick naturalness’ by ‘naturalness’, the Dasguptan view amounts to denying that there is naturalness, but if we mean ‘thin naturalness’ by ‘naturalness’, the Dasguptan view is best described as realist about naturalness, but anti-realist about objective guidance.

The question I want to ask about the Dasguptan view is: what are its commitments about what’s real? (Once again, keep in mind that we are still working with the intuitive notion of ‘being real’ as ‘being out there’, since we have not yet found an adequate canonical statement of the realism/anti-realism distinction.) Here is the answer that seems intuitive to me. On the Dasguptan view, a plenitude of objects and properties are real, not only *natural* objects and properties like *emeralds*, *green*, and *mass*, but *gratural* objects and properties like *gremeralds*, *grue*, and *schmass*. Dasgupta’s central claim is that neither the natural or the gratural items are objectively distinguished. From the perspective of reality, they are all ‘on a par’. Intuitively, they are accordingly all ‘equally out there’: the world is a hugely complex, tangled mass of natural and non-natural structure. What is *unreal*, on the Dasguptan view, is objective normative significance. There is no normative magic out there to tell us which bits of worldly structure (e.g. the natural bits, or the gratural bits) to aim at.⁴⁷

Consideration of this view gives us reason to think that the realism/anti-realism distinction should not be accounted for in terms of naturalness. We can bring this point out on both the thick and thin interpretations of ‘naturalness’ and the associated vocabulary. First, suppose that by ‘naturalness’, we mean *thick naturalness*, and when we say that a meaning is ‘joint-carving’, we mean that it is *thickly joint-carving*. According to **NATURALNESS**, one says that the *x*s are real when she says that discourse about the *x*s involves uniquely joint-carving meanings (for brevity, I will just say that ‘the discourse is joint-carving’). On the thick interpretation, one says that the *x*s are real just in case discourse about them is *thickly* joint-carving. A proponent of the Dasguptan view holds that there is no such thing as thick naturalness, and accordingly that no discourse is thickly joint-carving. On the thick interpretation, then, **NATURALNESS** implies that a proponent of the Dasguptan view is an anti-realist about *everything*: she holds that no discourse is (thickly) joint-carving. But this intuitively misdescribes the Dasguptan view’s commitments. Dasguptans hold that there is a vast multiplicity of real items.

Now suppose alternatively that by ‘naturalness’, we mean *thin naturalness*, and when we say that a meaning is ‘joint-carving’, we mean that it is *thinly joint-carving*. On the thin interpretation of **NATURALNESS**, one says that the *x*s are real just in case discourse about them is *thinly* joint-carving. Dasguptans are free to grant that some discourses (e.g. physics discourse) *are* thinly joint-carving, and they will equally grant that other discourses (e.g. discourses about gratural items, like *grue*) fail to be thinly joint-carving. But this means that, on the thin interpretation, **NATURALNESS** implies that a proponent of the Dasguptan view is an anti-realist about gratural items such *grue*—she holds that

⁴⁴ For further discussion of the matter of objective normative significance in particular, see Dasgupta (2024) and (2025).

⁴⁵ Dasgupta (2018), §§2–4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 284–285.

⁴⁷ An important upshot of this interpretation, if correct, is that Dasgupta’s anti-realism is really a *local* anti-realism.

discourse about grue is not (thinly) joint-carving. But this seems to misdescribe the Dasguptan view's commitments as well. The Dasguptan view is supposed to be *metaphysically egalitarian*: Dasguptans intuitively hold that gratural items are just as real as their natural counterparts. The thin interpretation of **NATURALNESS** precludes our ability to state this.

I conclude that **NATURALNESS** is an inadequate account of the realism/anti-realism distinction, because it obscures the intuitively intelligible Dasguptan view. A satisfactory statement of the realism/anti-realism distinction should be able to accommodate the possibility of holding that non-natural items are real.

4. A way forward

So here is our state of play. The basic existential account of the realism/anti-realism distinction suffers an intelligibility failure—it is undermined by minimalism. Extant sophisticated accounts, designed to be minimalism-proof, either suffer targeting failures or neutrality failures. Where can we go from here?

There are extreme options. We could, for example, take a 'put up or shut up' attitude, and place a ban on vindictory anti-realism. On this approach, anyone willing to make 'positive' claims like '*Airplane!* is funny' would be treated as automatically committed to comic realism. Alternatively, we could give up on the intelligibility constraint, and treat the realism/anti-realism distinction as legitimate but ineffable. Perhaps there is just no canonical way to make explicit that one thinks comic items are not *really* out there, but we manage to get the point across to one another at least some of the time with a combination of the right gesticulations, tone of voice, and luck.

A more conservative option is to take the realism/anti-realism distinction as primitive. This proposal emerges toward the end of Fine (2001), with his suggestion that we introduce a primitive concept of *Reality*, which can be regimented with an 'in Reality' operator *R* (which attaches to propositions) such that we can formulate claims like the following:

(13) There are comic properties, but it is not the case that *R*(there are comic properties).

(14) There are comic facts, but it is not the case that *R*(there are comic facts).

The left-hand sides of these conjunctions are statements licensed by minimal platitudes, while the right-hand sides are bolstered with the in Reality operator such that they are only acceptable to anti-realists. A vindictory anti-realist who says things like (13) and (14) is able to distinguish her noncommittal position from her realist counterpart; the realist, meanwhile, can express her own committal view by asserting that

(15) *R*(there are comic properties).

(16) *R*(there are comic facts).

Moreover, the concept of Reality can be used to rescue explanation-based strategies. If one is willing to accept the primitive notion of Reality, there is nothing standing in the way of embracing the ontic explanation horn of the dilemma for explanation-based accounts. The problem I posed for that horn was that it presupposes the realism/anti-realism distinction, and therefore cannot enable an adequate account of that distinction. But the primitivist will simply bite this bullet.

Of all these options, primitivism is plainly the most attractive. But I think we can do better still. In my view, there is an important lesson to be taken from Fine's discussion in particular. Fine's way of posing the minimalist threat is as a challenge to say what distinguishes "factual" (committal) propositions from "nonfactual" (non-committal) propositions. The comic realist insists that her claim that there are comic

items captures something about reality, while the vindictory anti-realist insists that her own tokening of the same claim does not. In setting things up this way, Fine concedes to minimalism that there are non-factual *propositions*: a comic anti-realist, on this view, can accept that $\langle \textit{Airplane!} \text{ is funny} \rangle$ is a proposition—namely, the comic proposition that corresponds to the (minimal) comic fact that *Airplane!* is funny. In Fine’s ground-theoretic framework, it’s an admissible question for any proposition what grounds it, but the answer may not always be another proposition in particular. Some propositions are *basic*, in the sense of being ungrounded. Notably, the distinction between basic and non-basic propositions cuts across the distinction between factual and non-factual propositions; Fine says:

In attempting to determine what is real [...], we cannot simply appeal to the fact that a given proposition is basic. For a basic proposition may be nonfactual; and clearly no nonfactual truth is descriptive of fundamental reality. However, any basic factual proposition will be real. For any true factual proposition is real or grounded in what is real; and so the proposition, if basic, will be real. (Fine 2001: 26)

So on the Finean picture, there is a fundamental reality, represented by all of the basic factual propositions, but there are also basic nonfactual propositions, which, while in a sense fundamental (ungrounded), do not represent fundamental reality. These propositions appear to be metaphysically free-floating—they aren’t derived from basic truths about fundamental reality, because they are themselves basic, but they aren’t genuinely fundamental truths about the world either. They rather seem to be truths that are in some sense not part of the world at all.

I think we can generalize from this idea to a new way of thinking about the distinction between real and unreal. The basic thought is that *to be real is to be real together with the other real things*. To be unreal is to be disconnected from, or not unified with reality. We might precisify this thought as follows:

UNITY. The *xs* are real iff the *xs* are *U*-elements of encompassing structure *U*.

An item is a *U*-element of a structure *U* if that item has the requisite status as defined by *U* to count as part of *U*. Spelling out the status of being a *U*-element thus depends on what *U* we are considering. I think this idea is best introduced via examples:

Example 1: spatiotemporal structure. An item is an element of spatiotemporal structure just in case it is located somewhere in spacetime—it is part of the one spacetime.

Example 2: causal structure. An item is an element of causal structure just in case it is causally related (if the relata of causal relations are events, an item is an element of causal structure just in case it is a constituent of an event that is causally related)—it is part of the one causal order.

Example 3: nomic structure. An item is an element of nomic structure just in case it is governed by the laws of nature—it is part of the one natural jurisdiction.

Example 4: grounding structure. An item is an element of grounding structure just in case it is fundamental or grounded in the fundamental (if the relata of grounding relations are facts, an item is an element of grounding structure just in case it is a constituent of a fundamental fact or a constituent of a fact grounded in the fundamental)—it is part of the one ‘great chain of being’ (cf. Schaffer 2009).

Example 5: fundamentality structure. An item is an element of fundamentality structure just in case it is absolutely metaphysically independent—it is part of the one ‘fundamental arena’.⁴⁸

Example 6: pluriversal structure. An item is an element of pluriversal structure just in case it is a mereological part of some spatiotemporal system (i.e. a concrete possible world) in the plurality of spatiotemporal systems—it is part of the one pluriverse (cf. Lewis 1986).

Example 7: experiential structure. An item is an element of experiential structure just in case it is a mind or is experienced by a mind—it is part of the one field of experience (cf. Berkeley 1948-1957).

⁴⁸ This phrase is David Albert’s.

As these examples demonstrate, candidates for encompassing structure have to be sufficiently general—they must in some sense concern everything there is. Each characterizes a different sense in which we might think everything is unified or ‘together’. Accordingly, we can also argue that various structures fail to be encompassing because they fail to unify everything we think there is. For example, we would surely reject fundamentality structure as our *U* if formulating realism about ordinary objects; perhaps causal or grounding structure would be better candidates.

In saying that for something to be real, it must be an element of an encompassing structure, the unity account treats being real as an inescapably *relative* notion: there is no making substantive claims about what’s real unless an encompassing structure is specified. To argue that an item is real is to argue that said item is included by *U*; to argue that an item is unreal is to argue that it floats free of *U*. Therefore, to disagree about what’s real is to disagree against the backdrop of some presupposed encompassing structure. This requirement forces regimentation of debates between realists and anti-realists. If the anti-realist insists that, say, numbers are not real, she should specify a choice of encompassing structure to express what she means—she may, for example, say that numbers are not real insofar as they are not part of the causal order. The realist can then fire back either by providing some argument that numbers *are* in fact causally efficacious, or by arguing that causal structure is not the encompassing structure. To make this latter case, the realist may appeal to premises concerning other intuitively real items that are not easily accounted for by causal structure—in doing so, she is now on the hook to specify an encompassing structure she takes to be appropriate for conducting the debate.

There is obviously much more to be said about the unity account, if it’s on the right track, and many questions to raise for it. I leave doing so to another time; my aim here is just to demonstrate that the account seems *prima facie* promising. I will instead conclude by showing how **UNITY** avoids all three pitfalls I have discussed for accounts of the realism/anti-realism distinction: intelligibility failures, targeting failures, and neutrality failures.

UNITY is not undermined by minimalism because the minimal platitudes do not produce minimal analogues of specific unity claims. For example, while its being true that *Airplane!* is funny suffices for there being a fact that *Airplane!* is funny that makes ‘*Airplane!* is funny’ true, it does not automatically follow that funniness is part of an encompassing structure. The facts concerning what’s funny might be free-floating from grounding structure as Fine describes, or comic items might not be located, or law-governed, or causally efficacious (how this is spelled out will depend on which structure is selected as *U*). Of course, there is a minimal sense in which all facts are ‘part of the world’ (we might call this the *Tractarian platitude*: the ‘world’ consists in all of the facts), but even this minimal use of ‘part of the world’ is insufficient for undermining **UNITY**, because **UNITY** demands a *specific* statement of whether the *xs* are elements of a *particular* encompassing structure. The vindictory anti-realist can deny that comic items are elements of a particular *U* even if there is a minimal sense in which comic facts are part of the world.

The unity account avoids targeting failures: realism and anti-realism are manifestly treated as views about what the world is like, and not as views about our discourse about what’s real. Given the specification of an encompassing structure—a general structure attributed to the world—realism and anti-realism are understood as metaphysical claims about whether items fit into that structure or not. **UNITY** captures the intuitive respect in which disagreements about whether the *xs* are real are disagreements about the world.

Lastly, **UNITY** avoids neutrality failures by not presupposing the reality or unreality of any particular items. On the unity account, ‘being real’ is in a sense a formal notion. We give content to claims about whether the *xs* are real by introducing a particular inferential role: one judges that an item is real when one judges that said item is a *U*-element of encompassing structure *U*, where it is left open which structure in particular *U* is to be identified with. As a result, one can accept the unity account of the realism/anti-realism distinction without being forced into any particular assumptions about what’s real. If one wants to deny e.g. that laws or grounding are real, one just needs to specify a different encompassing

structure against the backdrop of which debates about the reality of laws or grounding can be formulated. There are, for instance, potentially a number of candidate encompassing structures a Dasguptan could appeal to in order to formulate realism about objects and properties in conjunction with anti-realism about naturalness. More generally, the neutrality of **UNITY** promises stability through flexibility. We could still formulate views about what's real on this account even if the best candidates for encompassing structure in future metaphysics turn out to be radically different from what we think the best candidates are presently.

5. Conclusion

TBD

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