

Creative Anti-Realism

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Alvin Plantinga distinguishes two kinds of anti-realism that he calls existential and creative anti-realism. Existential anti-realists deny the reality of a range of objects. Thus, the medieval nominalists denied the reality of universals, and today's existential anti-realists deny that such theoretical entities as atoms, electrons, or quarks exist. Global existential anti-realism would be the radical view that nothing whatever exists.

The other kind of anti-realism – creative anti-realism – while not denying the reality of a range of objects claims that the objects are ontologically dependent on our ways of thinking about them. Plantinga says that Kant is the progenitor of creative anti-realism. Kant didn't deny that there are such things as sticks and stones but he claimed that they owed their existence and structure to activities of mind. Like existential anti-realism, creative anti-realism may be either global or restricted to a range of objects. Thus one might be a creative anti-realist with respect to mathematical objects or theoretical entities but a realist with respect to ordinary physical objects. In contrast, a global creative anti-realist would claim that all objects of whatever kind are constituted by the noetic activities of the mind. Plantinga says that global existential anti-realism – the view that nothing whatever exists – has never been popular, and I agree. But I also think that global creative anti-realism is currently very fashionable.

After distinguishing creative anti-realism from existential anti-realism, Plantinga devotes the remainder of his address to discussing the problems of creative anti-realism. I also concentrate on creative anti-realism; I try to show its absurdity and indicate some logical and linguistic traps that may have concealed its absurdity from some otherwise sensible people.

An interesting division of anti-realists can be explained by referring to the following three propositions. (1) If K has a belief about whether some object X has property p and this belief is based on the correct application of accepted standards, then if K believes that X has p, K believes truly that X has p, and if K believes that X does not have p, K believes truly that X does not have p. (2) If K has a belief about whether X has p and this belief is based on the correct application of accepted standards, then if K believes that X has p it does and if K believes that X doesn't have p it doesn't. (3) X has p only if there is at least one K who believes on the basis of accepted standards that X has p. Let us say that a person is an anti-realist to some extent if she accepts even the first of these propositions, but more

of an anti-realist if she accepts the second as well as the first, and still more of an anti-realist if she accepts all three. Notice that the first proposition entails the second, that is, the consequent of the first is K believing something truly of X but if this is so what she believes of X is the way X is. Nevertheless, I believe that a person expressing her anti-realist belief in the first form of words is only a half-hearted anti-realist; furthermore, some ostensible realists have subscribed to some version of the first proposition.

Acceptance of even the first proposition is not altogether harmless; many singular propositions obtained by making substitutions in the general proposition will be false. G.E. Moore would have accepted some version of the first proposition.² He would have accepted that if K believes that p and she believes this because she perceives p, then she believes truly that p. The statement as it stands is misleading. If this general statement is related to vision, the locutions "seeing," "seeing as," and "seeing that" need to be distinguished from one another. A person seeing a squirrel in a tree entails that there is a squirrel in the tree, but it does not entail that she sees that there is a squirrel in the tree. The distinction between *seeing* and *seeing that* may be overlooked because "see" in the first person present is used to make a knowledge claim. Thus, a person who says she sees a squirrel in a tree is making the knowledge claim that she sees that there is a squirrel in the tree. *Seeing that* also differs from *seeing as*. Seeing that something is p entails seeing it as p, but seeing something as p entails neither p nor seeing that it is p.

To relate this to Moore. The form of the first proposition that is Moore's *real* standard is that if K believes that p and this belief is based on her perceiving something as p, then she believes truly that p. This will not do. If she perceives (i.e., sees) the skunk as a pussycat, her belief that she is seeing a pussycat is false.

The central contention of anti-realism is that the object of knowledge is not independent of our means of knowing it. The anti-realist could safeguard this contention by having the second proposition read that X has p because K has conclusive reasons for believing that X has p. K can never have conclusive reasons for believing that X has p if X has p is a matter of fact, but the anti-realist cannot use strong reasons without seeming to leave open the possibility that X may not have p even though K thinks it does. The anti-realist paraphrase is necessary to give the position a semblance of credibility. However, the second proposition is not a full statement of the extreme anti-realist view. That proposition merely states that *providing* K has a belief about whether X has p and this belief is based on sufficiently stringent standards, then in these circumstances K's belief is a sufficient condition for X having p. It leaves open the possibility that in circumstances in which nobody has thought about whether X has p that X may have p independently of anybody's thought. The extreme anti-realist shuts the door on this possibility and asserts that a state-of-affairs cannot exist unless some believer on the basis of

adequate reasons believes that it does. This kind of anti-realism is so extreme that it has remained more of an implicit than an explicit view. But even the milder form has its own special difficulties. It has to admit, for instance, that Uranus before it was discovered may have existed independently of anybody's thought, but now that it has been discovered its very existence depends on what certain qualified believers believe.

Acceptable standards are determined (it is said) by conceptual schemes. K believes truly that X has p if her belief is in conformity with some conceptual scheme. This form of anti-realism is called conceptual relativism. Conceptual relativists differ according to whether there is only one valid conceptual scheme or many equally valid conceptual schemes. The first kind of conceptual relativism is fairly harmless if it is assumed (as I think it is) that the one conceptual scheme is necessarily the same not only for every human but for any other cognitive being who will ever exist. Still, I cannot see why it is felt that a conceptual scheme is necessary to support reality. But this harmless kind of conceptual relativism has not been very influential anyway.

Conceptual relativisms that admit more than one scheme and provide no basis for choosing between them have been prominent in sociology and anthropology as well as in philosophy. In philosophy of science, writers like Hanson, Feyerabend and Kuhn have advanced revolutionary views concerning the relation between theory and observation. What all these views have in common is that the observations that are supposed to confirm a theory are determined by the theory itself. Feyerabend puts the matter more broadly when he claims that what is perceived depends on what is believed.³

The view that theory determines the nature of observed objects should be distinguished from the view that theory determines the nature of observations. The distinction may be obscured by first person usage of perceptual verbs. "Tycho's observation was that the sun is mobile" does not have the same meaning as the false sentence "Tycho observed that the sun is mobile" but instead has the same meaning as the true sentence "Tycho perceived the sun as mobile." Tycho, however, would probably have claimed knowledge by saying that he had observed that the sun is mobile. The distinction is important, because while observations are partly determined by theories things are not. Thus, Tycho's observation may have been shaped by his theory, but still the sun stands still. Writers like Hanson and Kuhn might mean only that observations are determined by theories and not that things are. Even this would be serious if they mean total determination, for then it would be difficult to see how theories could be refuted or compared. And there does seem to be a tendency to suggest that reality itself (or at least the only reality we can know) is determined by theory. The slide from the claim that observations are determined by theory to the claim that reality is, is made easy by the fact that

“p” does indeed follow from “K observed that p.” So it would be true that the sun is mobile if it were true that Tycho had observed that the sun is mobile. Of course, he never did.

I do not mean to disparage the importance of theories and conceptual schemes in science and daily life, but I think the role they play has been misconceived. In my view a conceptual scheme is something like a mental set. Having the right mental set is helpful in finding a lost object or the answer to a problem. Without the right mental set the searcher does not know where to look or what to look for, and more broadly, nature reveals her secrets only to those who ask the right questions. However, neither theories nor mental sets can dictate what the answers are. And just as the wrong mental set can lead us astray so can the wrong theory. In each case success or failure is measured by something beyond the control of the set or theory.

Plantinga examines all the arguments that have been presented in favor of anti-realism and finds them to be “frail reeds.” He says that “it just seems incredible that whether there were dinosaurs ... depends in any way about how we think or speak.”⁴ But then why has anti-realism been accepted by so many sensible people? Plantinga then tries to show how anti-realism can seem to be reasonable. The attempt depends crucially on the way he defines “creative anti-realism.” He says that creative anti-realism is the claim that truth is not independent of mind.⁵ And the truth is not independent of mind because the bearers of truth – beliefs, propositions or what have you – are created by mind. If the things that are the bearers of truth are mind-dependent so is truth itself. But this is misleading. Mind is a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for truth. The other necessary condition for truth is the way things are. The anti-realist, however, disregards this other necessary condition for truth, and takes mind to be a sufficient as well as necessary condition for truth.

Plantinga could be rebutted by denying that the bearers of truth (propositions) are any more mind-dependent than the facts that they are about. But this rebuttal by way of abstract objects is unappetizing. I agree that the bearers of truth are mind-dependent, so in Plantinga’s sense, I, of all people, am a creative anti-realist. But that truth is mind-dependent in this sense is a trivial truth. This is not what the anti-realists want. It is not the truth that there were dinosaurs that they want to be mind-dependent. It is the past existence of dinosaurs that they want to be mind-dependent.

However, this attempt to make anti-realism seem reasonable is not Plantinga’s last shot. He argues that propositions are independent of human minds because they are what God conceives or thinks, and propositions are true if and only if they are believed by God. Plantinga’s brand of anti-realism is unobjectionable to me *provided* that it is combined with a realistic notion of the workings of God’s mind.

Without the proviso, God and all His (?) creation become creations of the human mind.

Notes

1. Alvin Plantinga, “How to be an Anti-Realist,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Sept. 1982, 47-70.
2. Not everything that Moore says is consistent with the view that I attribute to him, but see “The Refutation of Idealism” and “A Defence of Common Sense,” in *Twentieth-Century Philosophy: The Analytic Tradition*, ed. Morris Weitz (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 15-34 and 99-123.
3. Paul K. Feyerabend, “Problems of Empiricism,” in *Beyond the Edge of Certainty* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 220.
4. Plantinga, 67.
5. *Ibid.*, 69.