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INTRODUCTION: REALISM, REALISMS, AND ANTI-REALISMS

William Sweet

In what is, perhaps, its broadest sense, philosophical realism is the metaphysical position that reality – the world, the objects that we find in it, and all of their characteristics – exists independently of human consciousness. While the term is far from univocal, given this brief definition, many would likely say that philosophical realism is true – in fact, obviously true.

Yet, when one reflects on the matter, questions arise: What about mathematical truths or universals – e.g., properties such as ‘humanity,’ or ‘redness’ – or (what may be of more concern to people) beauty, morality, justice, and the divine? Does it make sense to say that *they* exist independently of human consciousness? Are such things “real” (i.e., objective and independent of human beings), or are they products of human consciousness and, therefore, constructed by and wholly dependent upon us? Is it possible to be a realist about religion, about ethics, or about any area in which people speak of values, such as aesthetics and politics?

The essays in this volume propose to address these questions, exploring some of the varieties of philosophical realism, but also some of the alternatives to it, by focussing on theories of realism and anti-realism in religion, ethics, and values in general (e.g., aesthetics and politics). The challenge that these authors confront, however, is to explain clearly which, if any, of these theories are adequate to what experience tells us about the world and, more generally, about existence and value.

REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM

Before turning to the essays in this volume, it may be helpful to recall that realism and non- or anti-realism have long histories, and that the terms can be understood in very different ways.

Realism, as a metaphysical theory, can be found as far back as the pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle, and it has its advocates through the middle ages and in the modern period, up to the present day. It is usually connected with epistemological realism – the view that there is knowledge of ‘external’ reality, and that this knowledge is primarily derived from or justified by sense perception. That being said, most metaphysical realists insist on the priority of metaphysics over epistemology – that the existence of a thing is in no way dependent on the perception or awareness of it.

There are, moreover, different kinds of realism. Consider, for example, epistemological realism. One can speak of ‘extreme’ realism: the view that all things that can be known – including universals – exist ‘outside’ or independently of the human subject. Or one can speak of direct