

# The Metaphysical Conception of Realism\*

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## 1 Preliminaries

'Realism' is a word that is used frequently to describe views in philosophy, and often its application in a particular context is unproblematic. For instance, most will not hesitate to label Berkeley's idealism an irrealist view of material objects, to be contrasted with our ordinary, pre-theoretic realist view. Or again, the realist about the unobservable posits of our scientific theories is easily distinguished from the irrealist instrumentalist. And in ethics, most will not hesitate to label Expressivists and Subjectivists as irrealists, distinguishing them from the realist Moorean non-naturalist.<sup>1</sup>

These are just a few examples. The point I want to make about them now is just that 'realism' is a philosophical term that can be applied across a wide range of domains, with a fairly intuitive sense. (This is not to say there are no hard cases.) We can then pose an interesting question: is there a natural, joint-cutting kind that all of these uses of the term pick out? If we choose to answer this question in the negative, several alternatives present themselves. One is to take these uses of 'realism' not to be univocal across domains; for example, on this view, we use 'realism' to talk about something different when applied to material objects and theoretical posits. Another alternative is to hold that there is some gerrymandered, not-very-interesting referent that is common to all of these uses. I have no direct argument for or against any of these options. But an indirect approach is available. Since there is a *prima facie* appearance that 'realism' picks

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<sup>1</sup>To fix ideas, I understand these versions of irrealism in roughly the following way. The idealist, following Berkeley (1710), holds that material objects are nothing more than collections of ideas. Instrumentalists such as Duhem (1954) hold that scientific statements are shorthand for statements about the actual or counterfactual properties of instruments of measurement. A Subjectivist, as I will use the term, holds that ethical statements report on some agent's attitudes of approval and disapproval. (The Emotivist view in Stevenson (1937) satisfies this characterization, but the more canonical version of Subjectivism I will have in mind throughout hold roughly that 'it is wrong for  $S$  to  $\Phi$ ' is true just in case  $S$  disapproves of  $\Phi$ -ing.) Expressivists such as Gibbard (2003) hold that ethical sentences express, rather than report, attitudes of this kind. Since it is the aim of the present essay to propose a theory of what all of the realist alternatives to these views have in common, I won't attempt a characterization of realism by way of introduction.

out a theoretically interesting property that is applicable to a wide range of subject matters, we can proceed by asking what the best candidate characterizations of the natural kind underlying our talk of realism *are*, and asking whether any of them withstand careful scrutiny. If we succeed in turning up a plausible account of this kind, then there is good evidence that there is a natural kind our term 'realism' picks out. If no such candidate is forthcoming, we then need to revisit the alternatives.

Before proceeding, a few caveats are in order.

First, we need to be careful to distinguish the present project from that of performing conceptual analysis on a term of art. 'Realism' in the relevant sense belongs almost exclusively to the lexicon of philosophers, and bears no straightforward connection to our pre-theoretic vocabulary. All we have to guide our use of the term is our own dispositions and intuitions, which we learned as we became fluent with a term by imitating the usage the term of art by others in our community. An account of realism which simply describes community-wide usage is nothing more than a redescription of the linguistic habits of a relatively small community. That might be of some sociological interest, but is no direct philosophical significance.

The project here is importantly different in a number of respects. As I have already mentioned, there is a possibility of failure—there might not *be* a theoretically interesting natural kind that plausibly counts as the referent of 'realism'.<sup>2</sup> We aren't prejudging the question of whether we will be successful in finding an analysis by embarking on the investigation. Conceptual analysis of the term, on the other hand, is much less susceptible to failure; concepts can be highly gerrymandered and disjunctive. Moreover, an attempt at an analysis in terms of a joint-cutting natural kind allows a characterization of realism that diverges to some extent from our intuitive judgments. If, in our final analysis, there is a highly natural kind that provides a close-but-not-perfect fit with our intuitive use of 'realism', we might well say that the views properly called "realist" differ from those we initially applied the term to. This divergence would constitute a failure to properly analyze the *concept* of realism. But if an account of the natural kind that underlies the concept is our target, it is not too surprising if the contours of the kind don't fit exactly with the concept.

The second caveat is that, in what follows, I will be assuming that a view is realist (or not) primarily in virtue of its *metaphysical* consequences. This is a natural idea—Berkeley's idealism seems irrealist precisely because of its consequences about the nature of material objects since they are, according to Berkeley, merely collections of ideas. Similarly for realism about unobservables; part of what makes the realist view objectionable, it is often thought, is that it takes an unwarranted stance on the metaphysics of unobservables. Moorean non-naturalism about ethics

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<sup>2</sup>Crispin Wright (1987, 3-4) indicates sympathy with this pessimistic conclusion: "The fact is that realism, as implicitly characterized by the opinions of writers, in whatever area of philosophy, who regard themselves as realists, is a syndrome, a loose weave of separable presuppositions and attitudes."

is similarly said to be metaphysically too extravagant. So it is quite natural to take our project to be one of asking which metaphysical consequences of a view are necessary and sufficient for realism.<sup>3</sup>

Such an understanding of realism is not, however, universally accepted. Many claim to find additional, non-metaphysical aspects to realism. Some are *epistemic*: Boyd (1989, 181-2) takes realism to imply that our cognitive faculties afford us a means of “obtaining and improving” knowledge in the relevant domain. (Dummett (1982, 55), on the other hand, claims to find in realism a distinctive commitment to the truth of claims “independently of whether we know, or are even able to discover” their truth.<sup>4</sup>) Other characterizations of realism involve *semantic* properties like truth, literalness, etc.<sup>5</sup>

I will proceed in what follows by ignoring these non-metaphysical dimensions to realism. The most straightforward motivation for this is methodological—insofar as it is clear there is some metaphysical component to realism, a characterization that posits additional epistemic or semantic dimensions to realism will thereby be less natural and more gerrymandered. A search for the natural kind underlying talk of ‘realism’ then does best by beginning with a purely metaphysical characterization; other dimensions should be added only if a purely metaphysical conception of realism is unavailable.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Lewis (1984) echoes this idea when he objects to Putnam’s own characterization of the model-theoretic argument in Putnam (1981, Ch. 2) as suggesting the denial of the core thesis of realism. Lewis explicitly says this is because it leaves the metaphysics of traditional realism unscathed:

[E]ven if the model-theoretic argument worked, it would not blow away the whole of the realist’s picture of the world and its relation to theory [...] There would still be a world, and it would not be a figment of our imagination. It would still have many parts, and these parts would fall into classes and relations [...] There would still be interpretations, assignments of reference, intended and otherwise. (Lewis (1984, 231))

See also Miller (2003). For a dissenter from this idea, see Dummett (1977, 383), and other citations in Miller (2003, 196).

<sup>4</sup>Strictly speaking, Boyd’s and Dummett’s claims are consistent: we might have good cognitive resources for arriving at knowledge of a most claims in a domain, while *some* of its claims are nonetheless in principle unknowable. Nevertheless, a tempting diagnosis of these divergent emphases is that Boyd and Dummett are latching onto merely accidental features of different realist views.

<sup>5</sup>See Miller (2003) for a discussion of the relationship between semantic and metaphysical characterizations of realism.

<sup>6</sup>Alternatively, the epistemic or semantic dimensions might be relevant to realism, but only in virtue of their metaphysical consequences. In this case, we can simply ignore the non-metaphysical detour, and ask directly whether the metaphysical consequences at issue feature in an adequate account of realism.

It is worth noting in this connection that, just I will ignore non-metaphysical dimensions to realism for methodological reasons, I will also ignore approaches that take realism as a metaphysical primitive for similar reasons. (The primitivist approach is suggested by Kit Fine when he talks in Fine (2001, 26) of “the notion of reality as primitive”.) Presumably, it is theoretically preferable to find an account of realism in terms of a metaphysically natural kind we are already compelled to accept instead of simply adding realism to our stock of primitives. If the project of finding a suitable natural kind fails, it is then worth revisiting the question of whether a gerrymandered or primitive account is preferable. I will not address this latter question here however since my aim is to explore the possibility that there is a viable natural kind to serve as the referent of ‘realism’.

The final caveat is that there may well be specific domains in which use of ‘realism’ has spun off from its general philosophical use, and in these contexts has a specialized meaning. So we should not be that surprised if, for instance, ‘legal realism’ turns out to denote a kind that has little to do with the general philosophical sense of ‘realism’. Of course it would be nice to assimilate the subject of these specialized uses to a core property of realism that applies across domains. The present point is just that we should be prepared to admit the existence of such specialized uses, and that this would not amount conceding defeat in the project of giving a purely metaphysical characterization of realism.<sup>7</sup>

The aim of the present paper, then, is to find a metaphysical characterization of the natural kind picked out by our general use of ‘realism’ (if any such kind exists). We will proceed from here as follows. §2 outlines three popular accounts of realism in the literature: these are the *existence*, *mind-independence*, and *fundamentality* conceptions of realism. §3 argues that they face a pervasive problem: they cannot account for the specific ways in which some but not all analyses of a domain are compatible with realism. §4 piles on, adding two further—and, to my knowledge, original—arguments against these prominent conceptions: they are hard-pressed to account for the *gradability* of claims about realism, and they cannot make intelligible the disposition of some philosophers to set a very high standard for which views count as realist. These objections together are, I think, decisive against the existence and mind-independence conceptions of realism. But the situation with respect to the fundamentality-based view is different: these objections only cause trouble for views which take give an account of realism in terms of *absolute* fundamentality, which is the standard approach in the literature. There is, however, another approach in the neighborhood, which instead characterizes realism in terms of *degrees* of fundamentality. §5 sketches how an account along these lines yields a promising account of our subject matter.

## 2 Three conceptions of realism

There are three main metaphysical conceptions of realism in the literature: existence views, mind-independence views, and fundamentality-based views. The views are not necessarily exclusive: one might advocate a characterization that conjoins more than one of the views described below. Each of these views has been explicitly advocated for the domain of ethics, and so I introduce these views in this context below. This gives us a common point for comparison of each view, but their application is quite general. I will evaluate each as a general thesis

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<sup>7</sup>Wright points to the same phenomenon, but is not very optimistic about the prospect for separating specialized uses of ‘realism’ from its common core. He says:

Of course, if there ever was a consensus of understanding about “realism”, as a philosophical term of art, it has undoubtedly been fragmented by the pressures exerted by the various debates—so much so that a philosopher who asserts that she is a realist about theoretical science, for example, or ethics, has probably for most philosophical audiences, accomplished little more than to clear her throat. (Wright (1992, 1))

about realism in general in §3 and beyond. Since I will argue in §3 that none of existence, mind-independence, or fundamentality are *necessary* for realism, the arguments there will *ipso facto* be arguments against conjunctive views. For expository purposes I will introduce the views as distinct approaches to realism in the present section though it should be kept in mind that I do not wish to ignore conjoining these approaches.<sup>8</sup>

### 2.1 Existence views

Existence views hold that a theory is realist just in case it entails that entities of an appropriate kind exist. What *kind* of entity is required is variable: some versions hold that realist theories entail that *properties* of the relevant kind exist; other versions hold the same for the relevant kind of *facts*. Existence-based views are prominent in the literature on ethical realism.<sup>9</sup>

One instance is found in J. L. Mackie (1977), where he intends his metaethical view, which he calls “moral skepticism”, to be the denial of ethical realism. He characterizes this view in the following way:

[W]hat I have called moral skepticism is a negative doctrine, not a positive one: it says what there isn't, not what there is. It says that there do not exist entities or relations of a certain kind, objective values or requirements, which many people have believed to exist.<sup>10</sup>

Mackie's “negative thesis” is a denial of an existence claim—namely, the claim that certain “entities or relations” exist, and is supposedly in conflict with standard realist conceptions of ethics on this count. This presupposes that the realist view entails the existence of certain things—“values,” as Mackie says.

Another case is found in Shafer-Landau (2003), which offers a broad taxonomy of metaethical positions. The first position is the eliminativist view, which “is represented by error theorists and non-cognitivists. Such philosophers do not believe that there are any moral properties, and believe that all appearances to the contrary are either founded on error, or can be otherwise explained away.” (p. 66) The other options are reductionism, which holds that “moral properties, if they are to exist, must be (in the sense of be identical to) one of these kinds of natural property” (pp. 66-7), and non-naturalism, which rejects “the identity of moral and descriptive properties.” (p. 72)

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<sup>8</sup>One might also advocate for a disjunctive conception of realism, which claims that more than one of the views described below is *sufficient* for realism. I will ignore these views for methodological reasons discussed in the §1. The aim of the present paper is to ask whether there is a natural kind picked out by ‘realism’, but these disjunctive views will not supply a sufficiently natural referent.

<sup>9</sup>See also one disjunct of the definitions in Cameron (2008), Devitt (1991), and Miller (2003). Pettit (1991) is more coy: “Realism in any area of thought is the doctrine certain that entities allegedly associated with that area are indeed real.” (Pettit (1991, 588)) He is explicit that *one* way of rejecting this thesis is to deny existence to the relevant entities (pp. 589-90). But he subsequently discusses other ways to deny realism, which suggests that he would not consider a bare existence claim to be adequate to characterize realism.

<sup>10</sup>Mackie (1977, 17)

On a standard classification, only the last two views—the reductionist and non-naturalist views—are the views that are consistent with realism. The eliminativist view, represented by error theorists and noncognitivists, is not. What separates these realist views from others in Shafer-Landau’s taxonomy is that they entail the existence of moral properties. This strongly suggests that Shafer-Landau takes the existence of these properties to be the key ingredient for realist views about ethics.<sup>11</sup>

These existence-based approaches to realism about ethics can be thought of as generalizations on a standard characterization of realism about unobservables in scientific theories. In van Fraassen (1980), the characteristic claim of realism is that *there are* electrons and other unobservables posited by scientific theories. (See also Cartwright (1983) and Fine (1991).<sup>12</sup>) This makes sense in the context of realism about unobservables: the primary motivation of the irrealist is to avoid what she believes to be an unwarranted ontological commitment to an unobservable world of electrons, and the way to avoid this commitment is to decline to believe that they exist.<sup>13</sup> Existence conceptions of realism in other areas are then natural extensions of this idea to other domains.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Elsewhere, he says that what is definitive of realist views is that they entail the existence of moral *facts* (see for instance Shafer-Landau (2003, 15)). Shafer-Landau may either be undecided between one of two existence-based views, or may think that they amount to the same thing. The latter view would make sense if one thought that facts are structured set-theoretic entities with properties (among other things) for constituents. Then, the failure of ethical properties to exist would by itself give rise to a lack of existence in ethical facts. I won’t work with these distinctions in the main text, since it will not matter for much of what I say whether the existence view is primarily concerned with properties, facts, or similar entities.

<sup>12</sup>Though, as Cartwright’s distinction between “entity realism” and other more robust forms of realism suggests, the assimilation of realism to an existence claim may not be appropriate even with our attention limited to the case of unobservables.

<sup>13</sup>In the case of van Fraassen’s irrealist alternative, the irrealist doesn’t take on the contrary commitment by denying that there are electrons. Rather, she withholds belief and (in van Fraassen’s terms) merely *accepts*, rather than *believes*, scientific theories for the purposes of carrying out scientific investigation. I take this to be an instance of the existence conception of realism, even though van Fraassen nonetheless recommends *acceptance* of an existence claim. This is because the difference between acceptance and belief concerns whether bearing the relevant attitude to the claim that electrons exist brings along an ontological commitment to the existence of electrons. I take van Fraassen to recommend mere acceptance over belief precisely because it does not bring about this kind of commitment.

<sup>14</sup>We might worry about this motivation: not all metaphysical commitments are *ontological* commitments in the sense that they are commitments concerning which objects or entities exist. Theories can contain unwanted metaphysical commitments by including an unnecessarily complex primitive *ideology* as well—see Sider (2012, Ch.6). Much of Lewis (1986), for instance, is motivated by the desire to eliminate any primitive modal ideology in the form of terms like ‘possible’, and Lewis is willing to pay a high ontological cost to do it. One might also think of Moorean non-naturalism as sacrificing ideological simplicity, by retaining an unanalyzed normative notion, in order to achieve greater explanatory power. The existence view, on the other hand, locates the distinctive metaphysical commitments of the non-naturalist in her ontological (and not ideological) commitments.

## 2.2 *Mind-independence views*

Another common way to characterize realism about a domain is to claim that all realist views hold the domain to be *independent* of the mental. Examples of mind-dependence (and accompanying irrealism) are familiar from the history of philosophy: think of Berkeley's claim that ordinary objects are collections of ideas, or a version of the Humean view of causation on which it consists in nothing more than constant conjunction plus expectation on the part of observers.<sup>15</sup> This thought seems especially apt when considering irrealism the ethical domain, as many paradigmatic instances of irrealist ethical theories enlist mental states of approval, disapproval, and the like, to play important explanatory roles.

One way to articulate this approach is found in Sharon Street (2006). She says:

The defining claim of realism about value, as I will be understanding it, is that there are at least some evaluative facts or truths that hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes.<sup>16</sup>

For Street, then, metaethical theories are realist just in case they entail that ethical facts are independent of certain attitudes.<sup>17</sup> Admittedly, Street suggests her characterization should be taken as *stipulative*. But it wouldn't be a natural stipulation if there weren't some plausibility to the claim that realism—in a non-stipulative sense—requires mind-independence. It is this latter claim, not any stipulated definition, that will be the focus of the following discussion.

A mind-independence characterization of realism can be extended to other domains in various ways.<sup>18</sup> The basic idea is that just as facts about value are mind-dependent if they depend on our evaluative attitudes, so likewise other domains are mind-dependent if they depend on attitudes in some way.

## 2.3 *Fundamentality-based views*

A final metaphysical approach to realism proceeds in terms of the notion of *metaphysical fundamentality*. There is a family of related notions in the literature; these include "Reality" in Fine (2001); "Structure" Sider (2012), "perfect naturalness" in Lewis (1983). Ralph Wedgwood (2007) articulates the relationship between this idea and realism in the following passage:

What exactly is realism? Following Kit Fine (2001) I shall suppose that a realist about the normative is a theorist who says that there are

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<sup>15</sup>See Goodman (1955, 59-65) for an interpretation along these lines.

<sup>16</sup>Street (2006, 110).

<sup>17</sup>For more discussion of mind-independence and realism, see Brink (1984), Cameron (2008), Devitt (1991), Jenkins (2005), Pettit (1991), Putnam (1981), and Wright (1992).

<sup>18</sup>The "various ways" of spelling this out can be obtained by either (i) specifying different *kinds* of mental states for the purportedly dependent domain (beliefs, desires, etc.); (ii) specifying *whose* mental states are at issue (the speaker's, the ascriber's, etc.), or (iii) specifying *how* the dependence relation is to be construed (*viz.*, the difference between modal and essential dependence in Jenkins (2005)). Of course these options aren't mutually exclusive, and one might combine (say) an ascriber-dependence view with the claim that the dependence is mere modal independence. I will ignore these details in what follows, because I believe that there are cases which are counterexamples to the mind-independence characterization understood in any of these ways. See SS3-4 below.

normative facts or truths—such as the fact that certain things ought to be the case, or that it is not the case that certain things ought to be the case—and that at least some of these normative facts are part of reality itself.

The notion of *reality* invoked here is a notion that has its home within a certain sort of metaphysical project—namely, the project of giving a metaphysical account or explanation of everything that is the case in terms of what is real [...] [I]f certain normative facts are real, then [...] these normative facts, properties or relations may also form part of the fundamental account or explanation of certain things that are the case.<sup>19</sup>

Wedgwood—and his predecessor Fine—primarily use the term ‘Reality’ to signify the metaphysically privileged layer at which gives “a metaphysical account or explanation of everything that is the case”. For terminological uniformity, I will instead use the term ‘fundamental’. In the sense in which I intend it, then, it is a blanket term for the family of notions employed by Fine, Sider, and Lewis. It stands for a metaphysically privileged or basic category that stands in a privileged, explanatory relationship to other non-basic facts.

Realism about the ethical on the Wedgwood conception is the view that the most fundamental explanation of everything that is the case makes reference, in part, to ethical facts or properties. The ethical features in basic metaphysical explanations of the relevant kind. This conception of realism generalizes easily to other domains: realism in general is then the view that the domain in question is fundamental. The real, in general, is that which is needed for the purpose of giving basic metaphysical explanations.<sup>20</sup>

### 3 Realism and analysis

§2 outlined three prominent metaphysical approaches to realism. They all face a common problem: they fail to properly account for the relationship between realism and reductive analyses.

While uncontroversial reductions are rare in philosophy, we are familiar with a range of purported reductions, even if they are known to fail. Examples include: the Russellian reduction of physical objects to logical constructions of sense-data,<sup>21</sup> the Lewisian reduction of modality to quantification over maximally complete chunks of concrete spacetime,<sup>22</sup> and the Logician’s reduction of mathematics to

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<sup>19</sup>Wedgwood (2007, 1-2)

<sup>20</sup>Fine does not appear to accept the position suggested by the Wedgwood quote above. Fine’s view on Fine (2001, 28) allows that some non-fundamental truths may also be Real, although there is a presumption in favor of their not being Real. (Fine also allows that there may be some basic truths that are not Real because they are “non-factual”, though he is explicit that these non-factual truths are also no fundamental.) Since, as noted in fn. 7, a version Fine’s approach that takes Reality as a primitive does not fall within the methodological aims of the present paper, I will focus only on the Wedgwood version of the view here.

<sup>21</sup>Russell (1912)

<sup>22</sup>Lewis (1986)

logic.<sup>23</sup> Our concern here will not be with whether reductions like these are correct; we will only be concerned with whether reductions like these—correct or not—are consistent with realism.

There is no simple answer to this question: some reductions are, and others are not, consistent with realism about the reduced domain. But the conceptions of realism outlined in §2, for basic structural reasons, all fail to account for this.

### 3.1 *Existence is futile*

Readers will be familiar with the distinction between reductions that are “vindicating” versus those that are “eliminative”. At a first pass, the difference is something along the following lines. Vindicating reductive accounts give an informative characterization of the reduced property or domain—they tell us something about the nature of the reduced thing. Other reductions—the eliminating reductions—show us that what we thought we were talking about isn’t really there. Railton (1989, 161) gives an example:

The successful reduction of H<sub>2</sub>O reinforces, rather than impugns, our sense that there really is water. By contrast, the reduction of “polywater”—a peculiar form of water thought to have been observed in scientific laboratories in the late 1960’s—to ordinary water-containing-some-impurities-from-improperly-washed-glassware contributed to the conclusion that there really is no such substance as polywater. Whether a reduction is vindicative or eliminative will depend on the specific character of what is being reduced and what the reduction basis looks like.

This is an intuitive difference—it really does seem like, upon learning of the relevant reductions, beliefs about polywater are discovered to be mistaken, while no widespread error is revealed for beliefs about water. But *why* is there such a difference? The natural answer is that the terms ‘water’ and ‘polywater’, like many terms with a life in a theoretical discipline, are associated with a “theoretical role” that determines as referent the property that best satisfies a set of theoretical constraints. These constraints include the observed properties of the relevant substance (that it is wet, clear, drinkable, etc.), the role it plays in explanations (that salt dissolves in it), among other things. The important part here is just that while these theoretical constraints tolerate *some* divergence in a candidate referent, if the best candidate strays too far from the intended role, the term fails to refer.<sup>24</sup>

This observation gives us an existence-based explanation of the difference between the water and polywater reductions. The water reduction supplies a property (H<sub>2</sub>O) that sufficiently approximates the theoretical role associated with ‘water’; the polywater reduction supplies a property (water-plus-impurities) that does even approximate the theoretical role associated with ‘polywater’. Railton

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<sup>23</sup>Whitehead and Russell (1910)

<sup>24</sup>See Lewis (1970).

notes that even the water reduction doesn't provide a *perfect* satisfier for the relevant theoretical role—" [e]ven the reduction of water to H<sub>2</sub>O was in part revisionist ... of both common-sense notions and previous chemistry"<sup>25</sup>—the difference is, the polywater reduction is much *more* revisionary. What is so revisionary about it? Presumably those who originally introduced the term thought they discovered a new, interesting form of water with a molecular basis similar to that of water. This supplies a theoretical role for 'polywater', one which places requirements on the molecular structure of its referent. (Compare, for instance, the difference between the gerrymandered molecular basis for polywater, and <sup>2</sup>H<sub>2</sub>O, or "heavy water". This has a molecular basis similar to that of water; scientists presumably thought they were discovering a similar molecular variant of water when they coined 'polywater'.) But upon discovering that the "substance" in question was really just water-plus-impurities, we learn that the theoretical role isn't even close to being satisfied; a substance that is water-plus-impurities does not have molecular basis similar to that of water.

The upshot: polywater does not exist. Unlike 'water', the theoretical role associated with 'polywater' goes unsatisfied; the water-plus-impurities referent is *too revisionary* to satisfy the associated theoretical role.<sup>26</sup>

This is a semantic story about the difference between vindicating and eliminating reductions. It is just a sketch, but that the existence view is wedded to something like it explaining the difference between the reductions in Railton's example, and in the difference between vindicating and eliminating reductions more generally, is highly plausible. It can easily be extended to other domains: Mackie, for instance, is naturally interpreted as claiming that there are no properties that come close to satisfying the theoretical role for 'wrong'. This is because the theoretical role for 'wrong' requires that its satisfier be objectively prescriptive, and nothing (according to Mackie) comes close to satisfying that role.

And it can be stated more generally: when the posited reduction basis is too revisionary (i.e., it substantially fails to satisfy the theoretical role associated with the term) the reduction is incompatible with realism about the reduced domain. These are the eliminative reductions. Others, which offer a reduction basis that fits more closely with the relevant theoretical role, are vindicative and hence consistent with realism. This approach to realism is encoded more precisely in the following thesis:

REVISIONARY REDUCTION BASIS (RRB) A reduction expressed by  $\lceil t \text{ reduces to } b \rceil$  is incompatible with realism just in case  $b$  substantially fails to satisfy the theoretical role associated with  $t$ .

Whether the existence conception of realism is plausible boils down to the question of whether RRB is true.

RRB might be interpreted as setting a high bar for irrealism. In making the case that certain mental states cannot be given a vindicative reduction, Paul

<sup>25</sup>Railton (1989, 161)

<sup>26</sup>Thanks to David Manley for suggesting this reading of the existence view.

Churchland (1981, 67) suggests that this is because mental states are like wrongness is according to Mackie—nothing comes close to satisfying the theoretical role associated with mental states. Thus he says:

Eliminative materialism is the thesis that our common-sense conception of psychological phenomena constitutes a radically false theory, a theory so fundamentally defective that both the principles and the ontology of that theory will eventually be displaced, rather than smoothly reduced, by completed neuroscience.

If a reduction must show the associated theoretical role to be a “radically false theory” in order to be eliminative, eliminating reductions (and hence, according to RRB, irrealism) will be hard to come by. Churchland is, after all, making a highly controversial claim when he asserts that neurophysiological theory will show that there is nothing that comes close to satisfying the theoretical role attached to mental states. But even if he is right about this particular case, it is implausible that the same thing happens in every case of irrealism: Subjectivism need not entail that the theoretical role for ‘wrong’ constitutes a *radically* false theory; the polywater reduction need not entail a similar claim for the polywater-role.<sup>27</sup> RRB, and the existence conception of realism more generally, fail if they follow Churchland in insisting that an extremely high degree of departure from theoretical role is required for elimination.

It is plausible in light of these examples that Churchland is making a stronger claim than required: eliminating reductions need not posit a basis that shows the theoretical role at issue to be a “radically false theory” and “fundamentally defective”. A lesser degree of divergence between a proposed reduction basis and relevant theoretical role should be nonetheless be sufficient for elimination.

This moderated proposal faces a challenge from the opposite direction, as it classifies intuitively realist views as irrealist. In particular, it is highly intuitive that some accounts are moderately revisionary of the relevant theoretical roles, yet are staunchly realist. A Vitalist view of living organisms such as that found in Bichat (1801, §1) is substantially revisionary in view of the theoretical role we at present associate with ‘life’. Quite plausibly, the role actually associated with ‘life’ is one that includes the claim that life is explained by biological and chemical processes. Hence the life-role requires that its satisfier not be an unexplained, primitive life force. The Vitalist view thus fails to qualify as realist on an existence-based view. This is a problem: while vitalism certainly has vices which warrant its rejection, being irrealist about life is not among them. In fact (and this is a subject I will

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<sup>27</sup>Even if Subjectivism fails to accommodate the claim that there is a single objectively prescriptive property of wrongness, and the polywater reduction fails to accommodate the claim that polywater has a molecular basis similar to that of water, it does not follow that these reductions show the theoretical roles associated with ‘wrong’ and ‘polywater’ to be *radically* false. These theoretical roles (according to the theories on offer) contain falsehoods to be sure, but to claim that they are *radically* false would be to go overboard: slightly modified theoretical roles, which drop the requirement of objective prescriptivity, or the requirement of a fairly natural molecular basis, would be *true*, for all we have said here.

return to below), its vices stem in part from the fact that it is unnecessarily realist about life, giving it a basic explanatory role when none is needed. This isn't an isolated example, either: the Thomistic view about value identifies goodness with metaphysically foundational facts about teleology (in this case, with facts about the ends necessarily sought by members of a kind).<sup>28</sup> It is another highly realist but—judged by our modern non-teleological picture of the cosmos—moderately revisionary account. In short, whenever the revision goes in the direction of giving a too much of a fundamental explanatory role to the reduced property, we will have a case of a revisionary view which is nonetheless realist. Such views are counterexamples to RRB, and show that existence isn't necessary for realism.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.2 *Too much mind-independence*

On the mind-independence conception of realism, only views that entail a domain to be mind-independent are realist. It is questionable that this approach can account for reductive Behaviorism as an irrealist view of the mental. Mental states, according to the reductive Behaviorist as I will understand it, are just are disjunctions of behaviors or dispositions to behave. The mental state *pain* on this view reduces to either clutching one's arm, or screaming, or ... (the disjunction of behaviors will need to go on for quite some time in order for the Behaviorist view to be truth-conditionally adequate). Similarly for other mental states. The resulting view is intuitively an irrealist one.

But it also satisfies the conditions imposed by any reasonable construal of mind-independence. That Sam is exhibiting the behavior of (say) clutching her arm doesn't depend on the mental. And on the Behaviorist view, Sam's pain is precisely an occurrence of the behavior of arm-clutching. So on the Behaviorist view, Sam's pain is an occurrence that is as objective and mind-independent as any. The mind-independence conception of realism gets things completely backwards in this case.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Aquinas, 1a 2e Q. 1 Art. 8.

<sup>29</sup>Another objection to the RRB-based view comes from the idea that the distinction between vindicating and eliminating reductions itself fails to be substantive. Quine (1960, 265) suggests something along these lines when he says:

For a further parallel consider the molecular theory. Does it repudiate our familiar solids and declare for swarms of molecules in their stead, or does it keep the solids and explain them as subvisibly swarming with molecules? [...] The option, again, is unreal.

We might explicate Quine's thought as follows: it is indeterminate, or perhaps a matter of pure linguistic convention, whether we associate with 'solid' a theoretical role that is adequately satisfied by subvisible swarms of molecules. What exists isn't in question: it is swarms of molecules. But whether this is sufficient for the truth of the sentence 'solids exist' is just a matter of whether we choose to associate a more or less strict theoretical role with 'solid'. The truth (or falsity) of this sentence doesn't reflect a deep metaphysical fact; just a choice about our language.

On this way of explicating Quine, his comments suggest that talk of existence isn't sufficiently metaphysically robust to capture the metaphysical dimension to realism.

<sup>30</sup>Cameron (2008) defends mind-independence accounts from objections from realism about the mental. Following a distinction from Jenkins (2005), he says that realism should be understood in terms of "essential dependence": irrealism about a domain holds that its "existence or essence is

The same issue will arise for any theory that is about broadly psychological phenomena. The account of syntactic principles, or “grammars”, in Noam Chomsky’s *Knowledge of Language* is one on which they are accurate descriptions of a psychological state realized in the brains of competent language-users. Grammars are, in Chomsky’s terms, “psychologically real”. This is a strikingly realist position about grammars. A competing—and less realist—view of the subject matter holds grammars merely to be the simplest set of axioms whose theorems are all and only the grammatically acceptable sentences. Thus in this case, it is the view which makes grammars out to be mind-*independent* that is the irrealist one.<sup>31</sup>

To be sure, the Chomskian view implies the mind-independence in one sense: whether a particular brain implements a particular grammar does not depend in any sense on what anyone thinks about the brain or grammar. This is assessor-independence, and both the Chomskian view and the axiomitization view imply mind-independence in this sense. But assessor-independence isn’t the kind of mind-independence at issue for realism, since even a Subjectivist can maintain that ethics is independent of the minds of assessors. Whether Sally disapproves of murder is a fact that holds independent of anyone’s opinions about her mental states; hence whether it is wrong for Sally to murder, on the Subjectivist view, is an assessor-independent fact. The reason why the mind-independence conception of realism seems to get Subjectivism right is that, according to Subjectivism, whether it is wrong for Sally to murder constitutively depends on *Sally’s* mental states.<sup>32</sup> Thus the motivations for the mind-independence conception of realism require that it be taken in the constitutive sense, but (as I have argued here) problems arise once we move beyond the paradigmatic motivating examples: grammars on the realist Chomskian view are mind-independent in the constitutive sense, while the logical consequences of a particular set of axioms are not. Mind-independence would seem not to be necessary for realism.

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constitutively dependent on mental activity.” (Cameron (2008, 7)) As Cameron notes, this distinction helps with avoiding the allegation that realism about the mental is trivially false, since it is trivially true that the mental depends on the mental. Cameron’s point is that this doesn’t follow when ‘depends’ is glossed as essential dependence: a mental entity can essentially depend on a non-mental event.

But the problem posed by the Behaviorist remains, even with this distinction in place. If we explicitly add that, according to the Behaviorist view, the mental constitutively depends on non-mental behaviors, the view remains intuitively irrealist. The true worry for mind-independence accounts applied to the mental, then, isn’t that realism is too hard to come by; rather, it is *too easy*, letting even the Behaviorist in.

<sup>31</sup>See Chomsky (1986, 39), and Soames (1989) for criticism. Some authors such as Miller (2010, §1) claim that a mind-independence conception of realism cannot fail to account for realism about psychological phenomena on the grounds that the dependence is *trivial*. The mind-independence view, says Miller, should be understood as holding that what makes theories irrealist is that they entail that their domain to be *non-trivially* mind-dependent. But Chomsky’s highly realist about the mind-dependence of a grammar is not a trivial one, as it is supported only by sophisticated arguments about language acquisition. See also Reynolds (2006, 481) and Rosen (1994, 286-9) for more discussion of the relationship between mind-independence and realism.

<sup>32</sup>Cameron (2008) and Jenkins (2005) both construe mind-independence in this way.

### 3.3 *Fundamental failings*

The fundamentality view of realism holds that realist views about a domain are just those that take the domain to be *most fundamental*. This view nicely accommodates some of our earlier examples of irrealism. By analyzing mental states in terms of behaviors, the Behaviorist view entails that mental states are not most fundamental. And, by analyzing wrongness in terms of speakers' attitudes of disapproval, the Subjectivist view entails that wrongness is not most fundamental. They are both irrealist views, as the fundamentality-based view predicts.

But this way of getting the right results in some cases for the fundamentality view gets them for the wrong reasons: *any* analysis of a domain will entail that it is not fully fundamental, and hence will be an analysis that entails irrealism about the analyzed domain. There are plenty of examples of analyses that are consistent with realism.

Here are two. An Identity theorist such as Place (1956) reduces mental states by identifying them with neurophysiological states. Hence, according to the Identity theorist, pain is not most fundamental; some neurophysiological state is more fundamental than it. Likewise, the view of moral properties like wrongness presented in Railton (1986) is one on which they reduce to facts about what promotes human interests from the "social point of view". Hence human interests are more fundamental than moral properties. But both views are intuitively consistent with realism—Railton even presents this view in a paper called "Moral Realism".<sup>33</sup> If the fundamentality-based approach succeeds in accounting for the irrealism of reductive views like Behaviorism, it will overgenerate: *any* reductive view will count as irrealist on this approach.

This conclusion isn't forced on the absolute fundamentality theorist, since she might adopt a different approach to claims about fundamentality. For instance: begin with the idea that there are some fundamental terms: perhaps those standing for basic entities and properties such as 'quark', 'spin', etc. A *fundamental fact*, we can then say, is one which can be specified with fundamental terms only.<sup>34</sup> Facts about the Identity theorist's reduction basis will, presumably, be fully fundamental. Finally, we can add that reductions are identities: facts about mental states—since they reduce to certain fully fundamental facts according to Identity theory—are themselves fully fundamental. Hence mental states according to Identity theory are themselves fully fundamental. This is an alternative approach that is available to the fundamentality which allows that some reductions are compatible with realism. But as before it gets the right result in some cases for the

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<sup>33</sup>Readers familiar with that paper will note that Railton acknowledges on pp. 200-1 that his view lacks some of the characteristic features of realism (though he nevertheless claims that it resembles realism enough to deserve the name). I will return to the question of *how* realist Railton's view is in later sections; for now, I will only make the point that Railton's view is much *more* realist than the standard Subjectivist view of wrongness. Any account that groups these two views together won't provide an adequate account of our intuitive use of 'realism'.

<sup>34</sup>See, for instance, Sider (2012, Ch. 7) for a similar idea.

wrong reasons: exactly the same claims can be made about the Behaviorist view, which will then come out as realist on the present approach.

#### 4 Further problems: gradability and shifting standards

The previous section focused on the relationship between realism and reduction to show that none of the §2 views are plausible metaphysical characterizations of realism. The present section adds two separate difficulties: the gradability of ascriptions of realism, and the apparent flexibility of the standards for realism in philosophical conversation. While (I will argue) these phenomena are inconsistent with the views of realism from §2, they also serve a positive purpose. In §5, I will suggest that they point us toward a specific refinement of the fundamentality view which can accommodate the issues raised in §§3-4. The crucial modification is that it treats realism primarily in terms of *relative* and not absolute fundamentality.

##### 4.1 Gradability

Some judgments about realism can be *graded* in form: that is, it makes sense to say that view *A* is *more realist* than *B*, without committing to the ungraded claim that *A* is realist and *B* is not. (Compare: Bill might be *taller than* Bob, without its being the case that Bill is tall and Bob is not.) Modality provides an example: consider first a fictionalist view about modality, an example of which can be found in Rosen (1990). Such a view holds that

Possibly I have red hair

is false on its most natural interpretation, since on this interpretation it says that there is a possible world where I have red hair, and (according to the fictionalist) possible worlds do not exist. But as a consolation, the fictionalist says that it can be appropriate to assert such sentences; the related claim

According to the fiction of possible worlds, there is a possible world where I have red hair

is true, and unembedded modal utterances convey the same information. The situation is analogous to ordinary statements about fiction: the sentence

Holmes lives at 221b Baker Street

is literally false (Holmes doesn't exist); but it can be asserted, as it conveys the information encoded by the true sentence

In the Sherlock Holmes fiction, Holmes lives at 221b Baker Street.

This view is an irrealist one when compared with the view of modality put forward in Lewis (1986), which analyzes modal claims in terms of quantification over maximal chunks of concrete spacetime. On the Lewisian view, 'possibly I have red hair' is literally true, as there is, given the Lewisian ontology, a concrete

chunk of spacetime where a counterpart of mine has red hair. This view seems strikingly realist when compared with the fictionalist view described above.

The gradability of judgments concerning realism about modality comes into focus when we consider a third view of modality on which it is unreducible. Views of this kind are found in Adams (1974), Plantinga (1978) and Stalnaker (1976), the details of which need not concern us here. All that matters is that where the Lewisian view quantifies over a concrete chunk of spacetime in analyzing ‘possibly I have red hair’, the present views use a modal term to specify the domain of quantification, and deny that it can be paraphrased away. Proponents of this view have claimed that they, and not Lewis, deserve the honorific ‘realist’ when it comes to modality. Here is Plantinga:

Lewis is a modal realist and/or a realist about possible worlds in approximately the sense in which William of Ockham is a realist about universals: namely, not at all.<sup>35</sup>

Of course there is *something* in the neighborhood with respect to which Lewis is a realist, and a pretty unusual and interesting thing at that: a plurality of maximal objects [...] Lewis is certainly a realist of an interesting kind, but what he isn’t is a *modal* realist.<sup>36</sup>

Plantinga may or may not be right to say that Lewis is definitively not a realist about modality. (I will return to this question in the next subsection.) Regardless, what Plantinga’s quote draws attention to is that the nonreductivist about modality can plausibly claim that her view is *more* realist about the modal—after all, where Lewis finds modal locutions to be eliminable in favor of quantification over concrete spacetime, the nonreductivist insists that the modal locutions are not eliminable at all.<sup>37</sup>

There is a difference in realism between the Lewisian and nonreductivist view, but with the fictionalist view in the offing, we see that this difference cannot simply be captured by saying that the nonreductivist view is realist, while the Lewisian view is not. Such a statement might well be true; it just doesn’t capture the full picture. Simply calling the Lewisian view irrealist would fail to distinguish it from fictionalism. But surely there is a difference, since only one view allows that possible worlds exist, and that modal claims are straightforwardly true. Calling the Lewisian view realist, on the other hand, would blur the distinction with Plantinga-style non-reductive views, as only the latter posits primitive, unreduced modality. The situation is markedly improved by giving up on a simple

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<sup>35</sup>Plantinga (1987, 189)

<sup>36</sup>Plantinga (1987, 213, his italics)

<sup>37</sup>For other examples of grades of reality, see McDaniel (2010). If one doesn’t feel the intuition strongly—perhaps one as a matter of fact is convinced that ‘modal realist’ *is* an appropriate label for the Lewisian view—one might try instead to imagine being someone who is *unsure* whether the Lewisian view is realist or not. When one is unsure in this way, one won’t find oneself completely at a loss for words to describe the situation. One could (and should) still say that Lewis’s view is and *less* realist than the nonreductivist’s (and, for similar reasons, *more* realist than the fictionalist’s).

binary distinction between what is real and what is not; we can then say that the Plantingian non-reductivist is *more realist* about possibility and necessity than her Lewisian counterpart. And the Lewisian is more realist about the relevant notions than the fictionalist is. Thus, insofar as we have a grip on the features picked out by our talk of “realism”, it would seem that they come in degrees.

One can easily generate similar cases in other domains where both nonreductivism and (borderline) realist reductivism are live options. For instance, Moorean non-naturalism about ethics is clearly a realist view, and differs in this respect from Subjectivism. But reductivist views such as those found in Railton (1986) and Schroeder (2007), which place objectivity-inducing constraints on how desire-like states determine ethical facts, appear to differ in *some* relevant respects from both views. For similar reasons as before some of these distinctions are missed if we use only a binary distinction between realism and irrealism.

Gradations of realism are apparently inconsistent with our characterizations of realism in terms of existence, mind-independence, or an absolute notion of fundamentality. Each employs a binary, on-or-off notion: existence, mind-independence, and fundamentality, as they appear in these conceptions of realism are not gradable notions. As stated, views give no account of gradations in realism. If these views are to be fully adequate, it must be possible to extend them to capture degrees of realism with degrees of existence, mind-independence, or fundamentality. As I will argue below, the prospects for developing the existence and mind-independence views in this way are dim.

Begin with the existence view. McDaniel (2013) has argued that there are *degrees of being*—or, equivalently on his view—existence is gradable. Such a view at the very least has the structural features necessary to accommodate the gradability data. Roughly, such a view has the resources to claim that possible worlds on a nonreductivist view exist to a greater degree than on the Lewisian view, which in turn exist to a greater degree than on the fictionalist view.

There are, as McDaniel notes, several ways of implementing the ideology of degrees of being. In many cases, the degree of being of a property (as McDaniel conceives of it) will correspond to the degree of Lewisian naturalness of that property: “unnatural properties are less real than natural properties, and their degree of being is proportionate to their degree of naturalness”.<sup>38</sup> There are then three live hypotheses about the relationship between these notions: 1. degrees of naturalness or fundamentality are prior to degrees of being; 2. degrees of being are prior to degrees of naturalness or fundamentality, or 3. neither is prior to the other since ‘degrees of naturalness’ and ‘degrees of being’ are names for the same thing (McDaniel calls this the “notational variant hypothesis”).

I think that a revised version of the existence view of realism is implausible on any of these options, though for different reasons. Things are simplest under option 1: if degrees of naturalness are prior to degrees of existence, then the existence view is false. Of course it would be *true* on this approach that possibility

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<sup>38</sup>McDaniel (2013, 8)

on the nonreductivist view exists more than it exists on the Lewisian view, this is of no help to a view that explains realism in terms of existence. For given that degrees of naturalness are prior to degrees of being, what makes unreduced possibility exist more than it would on a Lewisian reduction is simply the fact that it is more natural or fundamental on the nonreductivist view. The greater degree of realism in the nonreductivist view, then, is owed entirely to the facts about naturalness or fundamentality—not existence—that explain the data. Using option 1 to introduce degrees of existence amounts to giving up on the existence view, not saving it.

This still leaves options 2 and 3 for the existence view to work with. Most philosophers will be hesitant to admit a prior, undefined notion of degrees of being into their ideology, and hence will find option 2 unappealing. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to argue that this resistance is in general well-placed. But undefined degrees of existence do an especially poor job of accounting for the facts about degrees of realism, and while I do not wish to claim here that this makes the option 2 approach unacceptable, it is strong evidence that this way of implementing degrees of being cannot help the existence view of realism. The reason why undefined degrees of existence do a poor job of accounting for the facts about degrees of realism is that, absent a definition, we don't get a sufficiently rich ordering of being. The examples of degrees of realism given above point to the need for three degrees of realism, and further examples could be multiplied to make the need for further gradations plausible. But when introducing primitive degrees of being (that is, degrees of being that are not understood in terms of naturalness or some related notion), McDaniel describes only *two* grades of being.

McDaniel cites D. M. Armstrong as one early adopter of the degrees-of-being view; on Armstrong's view there are "first-class properties"—those that are sparse universals in Armstrong's preferred ontology—and "second-class properties", *viz.*, any real non-universals that can be truly predicated of things.<sup>39</sup> Aquinas similarly distinguishes between what can be divided into the ten Aristotelian *genera* and what can be the subject of any true predication, and claims that the former have being in a different sense than the latter. The point I wish to make here is that this approach to degrees of existence, which avoids defining degrees of being in terms of degrees of naturalness, doesn't give us anything like the structure we need to account for the facts about realism. (If nonreductivist possibility is divided by the ten genera but not fictionalist possibility, there is no third category for Lewisian worlds to fit in.) And even if more could be introduced without bringing in naturalness as a definitional resource, it is far from obvious

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<sup>39</sup>Armstrong (1997, 45), cited in McDaniel (2013, 6). See also McDaniel (2010, 632 ff) for a similar distinction, where he distinguishes grades of reality where objects that exist "absolutely" (*viz.*, substances) exist *more than* objects that exist "in" something else (*viz.*, attributes and privations). Objections similar to those in the main text will apply to versions of the existence view that appropriate this distinction in grades of existence to account for grades in realism.

that the resulting notion of degrees of existence would feature in an accurate and explanatory account of realism.<sup>40</sup>

This still leaves option 3, the “notational variant hypothesis”. Even if degrees of existence and degrees of naturalness are proportionate on this view because they are the same, a revision of the existence view should not find this to be of much help. For given the forgoing, most of our access to the facts about degrees of existence/naturalness will come through our prior understanding of ‘degree of naturalness’, and not ‘degree of existence’. Since our direct grasp of degrees of existence does not provide the needed structure for an adequate account of realism, much of our theorising about degrees of existence will proceed under the guise of degrees of naturalness. The notational variant hypothesis does not provide a resource for defending the existence view, but rather suggests that the proper account of realism proceeds in terms of naturalness or a related notion. This is exactly the positive account I explore in §5 below.

This is a *prima facie* case against accommodating gradations of realism within the existence view. Does the mind-independence view fare any better? One might also find various ways to implement a degreed notion of mind-independence, I think for similar reasons we can build strong *prima facie* case that the mind-independence conception will have a similar difficulty with accounting for gradability.

First, one might note that some phenomena are *partly* but not *fully* mind-dependent: for instance, the monetary fact that I have 5 dollars in my pocket is partly constituted by the existence of a piece of paper in my pocket, but is also partly constituted by the fact that people have certain attitudes toward such pieces of paper that endow it with purchasing power. Likewise, one might say that the fact that Barack Obama is famous is mind-dependent to a greater degree than the fact that I have 5 dollars in my pocket, since fame depends almost entirely on people’s attitudes. Thus, even if the partial grounds are either mind-independent or not, the fact that some but not all partial grounds can be mind-independent gives rise to one notion of degrees of mind-independence.

A second approach is to tease apart different precisifications of ‘mind-independence’, and to tie degree of mind-independence to how many of the precisifications a theory satisfies. For example: constitutive mind-dependence might discussed above is one precisification, but so are the notions of assessor-dependence, and Wright (1992)’s notions of Cognitive Command, Wide Cosmological Role, and the like (there will undoubtedly be other precisifications as well).<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>I don’t want to use this point here to claim that undefined degrees of being are objectionable and should be rejected. McDaniel at no point discusses the connection with realism that we are interested in here, and could very well think that the present considerations are not a huge mark against the view.

<sup>41</sup>For Wright, Cognitive Command in a discourse roughly amounts to whether, when agents who have the same evidence but arrive at different opinions, one of them must be making a mistake of some kind; see Wright (1992, 92-3). Width of Cosmological Role is explained in terms of the extent to which the facts in a domain is necessary for explanation of facts in other domains (with

I do not wish to deny here that either of these options are legitimate meanings for the gradable ‘is more mind-independent than’. Neither, however, can do the necessary work in explaining all of the cases of gradations in realism discussion above. One example is the contrast between the non-reductivist view about modality and Lewis’s reductivist view. Some concrete Lewisian worlds contain no minds at all, and hence are mind-independent to the fullest degree in either of the above senses. But they validate some modal facts—for example, ‘possibly there are no minds’ is true because such worlds exist—and so these truths will be mind-independent in the fullest sense. But the intuitive judgment is that Lewis’s view about these modal truths is less realist than the non-reductivist’s. One might also bring in the Vitalist in this connection: plausibly, our view of life as constituted by chemical and biological phenomena makes life out to be mind-independent to the fullest degree on either view. But the Vitalist has the more realist view. Degrees of mind-independence won’t be able to capture degrees of realism, since there is no sense in which the life force is more mind-independent than chemical and biological phenomena.

The foregoing doesn’t constitute a decisive consideration against either the existence view or the mind-independence view. But it does show that they will have difficulty finding a degreed notion that satisfactory explains the gradability in realism while sticking with their preferred explanatory tools. While we might have to settle for this mismatch if there is no alternative view that fares better, I will argue in §5 that the fundamentality views can very naturally be revised to accommodate the data. Before turning to this positive proposal, I consider one more (related) point of data that will be helpful in building a positive theory.

#### 4.2 *Shifting standards*

When gradable terms are in use, speakers can shift the standards for application of a term by making salient a particular standard. For instance, an utterance of

That music is loud

might be perfectly felicitous in a context where the music makes conversation at a normal volume difficult. But such an utterance could be followed by an interlocutor adding:

That music isn’t loud; we couldn’t hear it at all when the train went by.

It is clear that what is going on in this case is something like the following: ‘loud’ is used to indicate that something exceeds a contextually supplied threshold for volume. The first utterance takes the threshold to be the volume which would makes normal conversation difficult; anything is loud which exceeds this threshold. The second utterance attempts to shift this threshold: by making salient

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the exception of the domain of beliefs about the putatively explanatory class of facts); see Wright (1992, 196-7).

the volume of the recent train passing by, it sets a higher standard for the volume something has to be in order to count as loud. Many gradable terms are like this, permitting speakers in a context to (attempt to) set the relevant threshold at different levels.<sup>42</sup>

We can find something like this happening with ‘realism’. §2 was concerned with how, intuitively, some reductions are consistent with realism. But not all philosophers speak this way: some insist that only views on which the domain is unreducible are consistent with realism.<sup>43</sup> Plantinga’s claims about modality provide one instance. While Lewisian reductivism is an account on which many ordinary modal claims come out as true (and hence is to be distinguished from fictionalism), it nonetheless leaves modality out of the fundamental level. Plantinga insists that the Lewisian view is unrealistic about modality on these grounds.

Similarly in ethics: some reductivist views plausibly count as realist, but philosophers have attempted to deny this. Thomas Nagel (1989), for instance, says

[I]f values are objective, they must be so in their own right and not through reducibility to some other kind of objective fact. They have to be objective *values*, not objective anything else.<sup>44</sup>

In a similar vein, David Enoch (2010) describes ethical realism in a way that rules out the reducibility of the ethical, characterizing it as follows:

[T]here are irreducibly, non-naturalist normative truths, response-independent truths that are perfectly objective and that are not reducible to—not even identical with—natural, not-obviously-normative truths’.<sup>45</sup>

What are we to make of these claims? One option would be to pass these uses of ‘realism’ off as a different use of the term—there is, we could say, the sense of ‘realism’ which allows some reductive views to be realism, and the sense of ‘realism’ (used by Plantinga, Nagel, et al.) which does not. But this ignores an evident connection between the two uses: while these theorists are certainly making different claims using the term, they are nonetheless intuitively speaking about the same kind of thing as those who allow reductivist views to be realist. To see this, imagine someone who used ‘realism’ in a way that, in general, allows reductive views to be realist. This person might (falsely) say of Moorean non-naturalism that it is not a realist view. But such a person would be *contradicted* by Nagel, who would insist that Moorean non-naturalism is a realist

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<sup>42</sup>See, for instance, Kennedy (2013) for discussion.

<sup>43</sup>The following examples are due to Mark Schroeder; see his Schroeder (2005). He puts them to use in support of a different (though not obviously incompatible) account of realism. I discuss his account in more detail in the concluding section.

<sup>44</sup>Nagel (1989, 139).

<sup>45</sup>Enoch (2010, 414)

view. This difference in use of 'realism' is not so great that it precludes its users from disagreeing with those who use the term in the ordinary way.

Another approach is to say that in cases of disagreement, one party is simply making a mistake: their application (or lack thereof) of 'realism' simply fails to match the facts about which views are, and which views are not, realist. Here the problem is different. While we have no issue with explaining apparent disagreement between apparent uses of the term, the mistakes in question are *unintelligible*. In particular, the mistake-based account provides no explanation for *why* Plantinga, Nagel et al. mis-use the term by labeling only nonreductive views as realist, while nevertheless using the term with its common philosophical meaning.

The gradable aspect to realism provides a neat account of this issue. When there is some dimension or scale along which views which are realist to different degrees differ, the threshold for *where* on this scale the cut-off point for realism lies can be a fluid matter, depending on features of context. Hence there is a natural account on which Plantinga, Nagel et al. are speaking as if the threshold for realism is a very strict one—or, alternatively, are trying to change the setting of the threshold by speaking as if it is a strict one. Thus they are using the term with broadly the same meaning as other speakers, since 'realism' is a gradable term in everyone's mouth. The differences, in effect, amount only to differences over where on the relevant scale the threshold is set. This makes divergent use of the term by competent speakers intelligible since it avoids chalking the differences up to brute misapplication by some parties.

One point of clarification is in order here. I am not claiming that Plantinga, Nagel, and Enoch are *correct* to speak as if strict standards for realism are in place. Even if the semantic structure of gradable adjectives like 'loud' permit a shift to a strict threshold, it is not always correct to assertively utter a sentence whose truth requires a strict threshold. (I do not succeed in setting a higher standard for loudness if, when discussing whether a certain cricket is loud in comparison to other crickets, I point that the volume of cricket chirps is generally much lower than that of a Boeing 747.) The present claim is then weaker, in that it doesn't take a stance on exactly when standard-shifting with 'realism' succeeds. The claim is instead that, when someone speaks as if a stricter standard for a gradable term is in place, they are using the term with the same meaning as those who don't speak as if the strict standard is in place, and are not making a semantically unintelligible mistake in doing so. If they speak falsely, they are making some mistake, but it is a failure to successfully navigate conversational rules, and is consistent with full semantic mastery.

The present section has outlined the ways in which gradability is central to realism. The next section explores a promising option for what provides the degreed underpinning for realism. While it doesn't even make sense to talk about degrees of existence or mind-independence, there is a serviceable notion of degrees of fundamentality. I will sketch below what a degree of fundamentality

might be, and how it might be put to work in addressing the issues canvassed in §§3-4.

## 5 Relative fundamentality and realism

One thing (or property, fact, etc.) might be *more* fundamental than another without being *fully* fundamental. For instance: it is natural to say that if acids are electron-pair acceptors, then there is something that is more fundamental than acidity, namely electrons. Of course, while pairs of electrons are, while more fundamental than acidity, not fully fundamental; presumably a single electron is more fundamental than a pair of them. Similar examples are easily multiplied: if gravity is curvature in spacetime, then spacetime points are more fundamental than gravity. And if galaxies are collections of stars and other celestial objects surrounded by an interstellar medium, then stars are more fundamental than galaxies.

I will call these claims of the form ‘*A* is more fundamental than *B*’ claims about *relative* fundamentality, or claims about *degrees* of fundamentality.<sup>46</sup> Much of what we said by way of introducing the notion of absolute fundamentality in §2.3 applies to relative fundamentality as well: electrons, for example, provide a kind of “metaphysical explanation” for facts about electron-pairs; stars provide the same kind of explanation for facts about galaxies, and spacetime points provide the same kind of explanation for facts about gravity.

Two clarifications are in order here. The first concerns our understanding of the fundamental as that which provides the “most satisfying” metaphysical explanation (in the words of Fine (2001)). Obviously this kind of gloss applies to that which is absolutely fundamental, and cannot be applied directly to explain relative fundamentality. Since electrons have further explanations in terms of the subatomic, electron-pair acceptors do not provide the most satisfying metaphysical explanation of acidity. Still, we can say that what is *more* fundamental provides the same kind of metaphysical explanation; it simply need not provide the *most* satisfying version of this kind of explanation. Thus, the electron-based explanation of acidity is still a metaphysical explanation of the same kind, even if it isn’t the final explanation. An analogy with causal explanation may be helpful here: one can causally explain the breaking of a window in terms of the ball that was thrown, its trajectory, the fragility of the glass, etc. This is a perfectly legitimate causal explanation if filled out appropriately. But it isn’t the *final* causal explanation: that would make reference to the causal precursors of the throwing of the ball, and the causal precursors of the precursors, and so on, perhaps only terminating in a description of the Big Bang. A most satisfying causal explanation of this kind doesn’t preclude the existence of more proximate, non-final causal

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<sup>46</sup>Strictly speaking, these do not amount to the same thing: it could be that *A* is more fundamental than *B*, while there are no specific *degrees* of fundamentality,  $d_A$  and  $d_B$ , such that *A* is fundamental to degree  $d_A$ , *B* is fundamental to degree  $d_B$ , and  $d_A > d_B$ . At times, I will speak as if these degrees exist, but much of what I say below can be rephrased (albeit in somewhat more complicated language) using only the comparative ‘more fundamental than’ and without reference to degrees.

explanations. That which is *more* fundamental similarly provides more proximate non-final metaphysical explanations.

The second clarification is that the examples of differences in relative fundamentality mentioned above all represent discoveries from the physical sciences—in particular, chemistry, physics, and astronomy. This might be thought to distinguish relative fundamentality, as I have described it here, from the notion of absolute fundamentality as developed by Fine and others. On these approaches, the absolute notion is approached through primarily through metaphysical or philosophical theorizing—and not, importantly, through empirical science. The relative notion of fundamentality, as described here, appears not to be well-suited to feature in a metaphysical account of realism.

The appearance of an important difference may, however, be misleading. There are some approaches to absolute fundamentality where empirical science does play a central role, but in which the notion of fundamentality retains its metaphysical character. Lewis's conception of "perfect naturalness" (his terminology for what amount to absolutely fundamental properties) also assigns a central role to empirical science. He says:

To a physicalist like myself, the most plausible inegalitarianism seems to be one that gives a special elite status to the 'fundamental physical properties': mass, charge, quark colour and flavour . . . . (It is up to physics to discover these properties, and name them; physicalists will think that present-day physics at least comes close to providing a correct and complete list.)<sup>47</sup>

Lewis thus gives physics (or something close to it) a close relationship to the absolutely fundamental. But the "close relationship" isn't one that undermines its metaphysical character. Lewis isn't proposing to *define* the absolutely fundamental in terms of the practices of physicists. Instead, this picture is one on which physics provides an *epistemic* window into the metaphysical absolute fundamentality facts. That physics makes reference to quarks doesn't make quarks most fundamental; rather, it is simply the means by which we know that they are. Similarly, then, for other sciences and relative fundamentality: these sciences provide an epistemic window into the facts about relative fundamentality, but do not constitute them. Once we separate the epistemic from the metaphysical dimension to fundamentality, the relative version is in no worse shape to feature in a metaphysical account of realism.

With these clarifications in place, we can investigate a positive proposal concerning the natural kind that underlies our talk of 'realism'. The case for this account begins with the following observation: relative fundamentality provides the scale or gradations needed to explain gradability and standard shifting in judgments about realism. This is the primary motivation, but it also fares better

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<sup>47</sup>Lewis (1984, 228). See also Schaffer (2004) for an extension of this position to sciences beyond physics.

as an account of which reductions are, and which reductions are not, irrealism-entailing.

### 5.1 Gradability

Gradability is straightforward when our starting point is relative fundamentality. The account in general, says that a view is *more* realist about a domain to the extent that the view take the domain to be *more* fundamental. Degrees of realism come with degrees of fundamentality. This is the account in general form, but more can be said about why it is compelling in specific cases.

Recall our earlier example: a nonreductivist view about modality is quintessentially realist; the Lewisian reductivist view is less so, but still fares better on the same scale than a fictionalist view, which is not realist at all. This is naturally explained by the following facts:

**R1** Modality on the nonreductivist view is more fundamental than it is on the Lewisian view;

**R2** Modality on the Lewisian view is more fundamental than it is on the fictionalist view.

**R1** holds because the nonreductivist takes modality to be *most* fundamental—it reduces to nothing further—while the Lewisian takes it to be less fundamental as she explains modal facts in terms of facts about concrete chunks of spacetime. **R2** holds because concrete chunks of spacetime are more fundamental than the fiction of possible worlds which the fictionalist appeals to.

I will say more in §5.2 about how these claims about the fundamentality of modality according to different (and incompatible) views are to be assessed. For now, I simply wish to note that there is a very natural understanding of these claims on which they are true. In the previous section I argued that our grasp of gradable versions of existence and mind-independence is not sufficient to support analogous gradable claims, and that plausible attempts to define gradations of existence and mind-independence will, in one way or another, not suit the needs of an account of realism in these terms. The present point is that the fundamentality-based view does not face the same problems, since there is an intuitive use of ‘more fundamental than’ on which **R1** and **R2** are true.

Analogous points could be made about other domains where gradable claims about realism are intuitive, for instance when non-naturalist, Railton-style reductivist, and Subjectivist views in ethics. This is a virtue of a relative fundamentality-based account of realism, I am claiming, but it also raises a flag. What is it about the Subjectivist view that makes it a view according to which the ethical is much less fundamental than it is according to other reductivist views? One answer, found in Lewis (1986) is that the definition in some privileged language of wrongness on the Subjectivist view is much *longer* than the definition of wrongness according to Railton and Schroeder.<sup>48</sup> This has some plausibility: the

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<sup>48</sup>Here is Lewis:

Subjectivist requires a complicated definition of wrongness that assigns intensions to utterances in contexts; other reductivists can do without this added layer of complexity. But such a difference in length of characterization is just a difference of complexity at *some* level of description—and it isn't obvious that these differences will remain if we describe these properties in more fundamental terms. Indeed, we might worry that there will be *no* good reason to claim that the Subjectivist has a more complicated definition at the most natural level of evaluation of such matters.<sup>49</sup>

An account of realism in terms of relative fundamentality then owes an account of what makes for differences in degree of fundamentality that is not simply tied to complexity of definition. I will not try to show here how it can repay the debt, and will instead work with an intuitive understanding of where questions of degree of fundamentality arise. But this omission shouldn't obscure the need for something to be said on the matter—it is a non-trivial question whether an adequate account of relative fundamentality is available for present purposes.

## 5.2 Reduction

While relative fundamentality can provide us with an underpinning for degrees of realism, this does not by itself provide an account of the ungraded term 'realism'. Compare: simply knowing that my coffee grinder is louder than a cricket is not sufficient for knowing whether my coffee grinder is loud *simpliciter*. The ungraded claim requires in addition a context where the threshold for loudness is lower than the volume of my coffee grinder. The account in §5.1 of the degreed 'more realist than' can be supplemented in an analogous way to yield an account of the corresponding ungraded term.

Begin with the difference between an Identity theorist about mental states (a realist) and a reductive Behaviorist (an irrealist). It is very natural to say that the difference between the two views lies in how fundamental they entail mental states to be. If pain is a particular neurophysiological state, it is more fundamental than it is if it is a disjunction of behaviors. (Note that by 'entail', we don't mean *logical* entailment, as the formulations of Identity theory and Behaviorism need not contain the word 'fundamental' at all. Rather, 'entail' as used here just indicates what is true under the supposition of a particular theory: to say that Behaviorism entails that mental states aren't very fundamental is just to say that, under the supposition that Behaviorism is true, it is true that mental states aren't very fundamental. More on this below.) This suggests a threshold account of realism about mental states along the following lines:

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Some few properties are *perfectly* natural. Others, even though they may be somewhat disjunctive or extrinsic, are at least somewhat natural in a derivative way, to the extent that they can be reached by not-too-complicated chains of definability from the perfectly natural properties. (Lewis (1986, 61); see also Lewis (1983, 347)).

<sup>49</sup>See Hawthorne (2006, 2007), and [author's article] for versions of this problem and a sketch of a positive proposal about the nature of relative fundamentality.

MENTAL STATE REALISM (MSR) There is a degree of fundamentality  $d$  such that a theory  $T$  is realist about mental states just in case  $T$  entails that mental states are fundamental to (at least) degree  $d$ .

The assumption behind MSR, then, is that the Identity theorist's view entails pain to be fundamental to the relevant degree, whereas the Behaviorist's does not. Views analogous to MSR which posit a threshold for realism might then be adopted for other domains.<sup>50</sup>

MSR and its analogues for other domains raise the question of whether the threshold for realism is the *same* across different domains. That is: is it the case that there is a single degree of fundamentality  $d$  such that realist views about *any* domain entail it to be fundamental to degree  $d$ ?

Here is a simple argument that the answer is 'no'. An Identity theory of mental states holds that mental states are neurophysiological states. A number-theorist might identify numbers with similar entities—perhaps the synaptic firings that correspond to counting operations in normal human minds. Thus, the number 2 on this view reduces to the neurophysiological state that occurs when normal humans count to the second item in a normal counting sequence. The reduction base for pain and the number 2 are then very similar in kind according to these views; plausibly pain and numbers are, on these views, fundamental to the same degree. But Identity theory seems clearly to be a realist view of pain, while our reduction of numbers entails an irrealist view about numbers. So the threshold for realism about numbers and mental states must be set at different points on the scale of degrees of fundamentality.

If there is variability in where the threshold for realism is set, one approach to accommodating it is to take another aspect of the analogy with gradable adjectives seriously. For 'loud' and other gradables, the threshold is set by conversational context. Exactly what features of context are relevant, and how they conspire to set a standard for loudness is a tricky matter. But it is clear that my coffee grinder counts as loud in some contexts and not others, and that the difference between these contexts in part has to do with the *comparison class* at issue.<sup>51</sup> The comparison class contains contextually and conversationally salient objects, and determines in some way where on the scale of volume the threshold for loudness is to be set. In contexts where the comparison class contains only chirping crickets, my coffee grinder counts as loud; in contexts where the comparison class contains only train whistles, it does not.

The comparison class in a discussion of realism is naturally taken to include other salient views about the domain in question. Thus, when realism about mental states is at issue, the comparison class includes theories of mental states that conversational participants take to be relevant. This comparison class then

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<sup>50</sup>Note that this threshold needn't require a very high degree of fundamentality. Identity theory might imply that mental states aren't very fundamental at all. All MSR requires is that competing irrealist views, like Behaviorism, imply that mental states are even less fundamental.

<sup>51</sup>See Klein (1980) for discussion of the notion of a comparison class, and Ludlow (1989) for more on the ways in which comparison classes are fixed.

(somehow) sets a threshold for fundamentality. Quite plausibly, the salient views about mental states will constitute a comparison class that determines a degree of fundamentality that is higher than the degree to which mental states are fundamental on the Behaviorist view. This is what sets the relevant threshold for MSR.

The story about realism in other domains is then a variation on this theme. When domains other than the mental are at issue, the comparison class is different as well: if we shift to a discussion of realism about numbers, then salient theories of numbers populate the comparison class, not theories of mental states. This shift may well determine a different threshold for realism. Without taking a stand on the exact mechanisms by which competing views populate a comparison class, and the precise way in which a comparison class determines a threshold, the account of realism is, in general form, as follows:

**REALISM** For any domain  $D$ , the comparison class for  $D$  determines a degree of fundamentality  $d$  such that a theory  $T$  is realist about  $D$  just in case  $T$  entails that  $D$  is fundamental to (at least) degree  $d$ .

**REALISM** is extremely natural as an account of what makes the instrumentalist an irrealist about the unobservable entities of scientific theories, and what makes the Vitalist view of life highly realist, to take a few examples. For the Instrumentalist is plausibly construed as holding that instruments of measurement are more fundamental than unobservables. And the Vitalist is plausibly construed as holding that biological processes are *not* more fundamental than life—and hence that the latter is highly fundamental. Given plausible comparison classes for these domains, **REALISM** fares nicely as an account of realism for these cases that proved difficult for other views of realism to accommodate.

Several notes about how **REALISM** is to be understood are in order. First, it doesn't require that the views under consideration explicitly make claims about how fundamental their domains are. From the central claim of Instrumentalism—that facts about unobservables are complicated facts about measuring instruments—it follows that unobservables aren't very fundamental since they are less fundamental than instruments. Instrumentalism doesn't need to include any claims about fundamentality in order to have this implication; its claims about what unobservables are suffice. (Thus views whose proponents do not theorize in terms of fundamentality, or reject such theorizing, can still be assessed for realism. One needs to look at what the view's claims about the nature of its target domain imply concerning fundamentality, which is possible even if the canonical statement of the view doesn't include the term 'fundamental', or if its proponents explicitly avoid making claims about fundamentality.)

This leads to a second issue concerning the interpretation of **REALISM**: in assessing whether a view is realist, we can't remain neutral on how fundamental the components of the *analysans* are. Unobservables on the Instrumentalist view aren't very fundamental because instruments aren't very fundamental; mental

states on the Behaviorist view aren't very fundamental because disjunctions of behaviors aren't very fundamental. To make these claims, we simply look at how fundamental instruments or behaviors *actually are*. Thus if one formulated a version of Behaviorism that is identical to the original formulation, one would not thereby formulate a realist version of Behaviorism. It is an independent fact that disjunctions of behaviors aren't very fundamental, and we hold this point fixed in working out the implications of Behaviorism for the fundamentality of mental states. Of course not everything is held fixed—assessing whether Behaviorism is a realist view requires supposing that Behaviorism is true, and thereby supposing that mental states really are disjunctions of behaviors; we are asking how fundamental mental states are under such a supposition when working out whether the view is realist according to REALISM.

Here is the approach in slightly greater generality. There are certain “core” claims of a view, which we take on board by supposing them to be true, and other “ancillary” claims which we leave fixed, held to match how they are in the actual world. Behaviorism's core claim is that mental states are behaviors—to assess how fundamental behaviors are on this view, then, we assume that this identity holds. But facts about what behaviors are, and how they are related to physical, chemical, and biological facts, are ancillary claims for Behaviorism. So when we undertake the supposition that the core claim of Behaviorism is true, we continue to suppose that the actual facts about the metaphysics of behavior are in place, since these are ancillary to the core claims of Behaviorism. Similar questions about other views and domains are settled in an analogous way, though note that in some cases the nature of the *analysans* will be a core claim: for the Berkelian Idealist, the core claim about material objects is not just that material objects are collections of ideas, but also that these ideas exist only in the mind of God. There may of course be some vague cases where it is indeterminate whether a particular claim is a core or ancillary claim with respect to a particular view. In these cases, it may well be vague how fundamental a view makes its target domain out to be.

REALISM, of course, is a comparative claim which concerns the relationship between the degree of fundamentality of a domain according to one view, and the degree of fundamentality of the same domain according to other, distinct views. Whether a view is realist according to REALISM, then, cannot be settled by simply making one supposition, and working out the fundamentality-facts from there. Rather, it requires multiple incompatible suppositions, and working out the consequences for the fundamentality of  $D$  from each supposition. Suppose, for the sake of concreteness, that we wish to ask whether  $T_1$  is realist, and the comparison class of salient views consists in  $T_2$  and  $T_3$ . First we need to ask how fundamental  $D$  is according to  $T_2$  and  $T_3$ ; this determines a threshold for realism. To do this, we start by supposing that the core claims of  $T_2$  are true (while leaving ancillary claims fixed) and asking how fundamental  $D$  is on such a supposition. Then we do the same for  $T_3$ , making a distinct supposition (this time involving only the core claims of  $T_3$  and ask how fundamental  $D$  is under this supposition. These first two steps determine a threshold for realism. (I have not specified how exactly

the threshold is determined from the comparison class, but note that one might ask a similar question about how the volume of salient noises sets a threshold for 'loud'; one will be hard-pressed to find an informative and substantive answer to this question as well.) Finally, we make a separate supposition of the core claims of  $T_1$  and ask how fundamental  $D$  is on this supposition. If the degree of fundamentality meets or exceeds the threshold,  $T_1$  is realist about  $D$ ; otherwise not. As before, vagueness and imprecision might enter in at any of these stages; this may result in vagueness in whether  $T_1$  is realist.<sup>52</sup>

That it can account for other intuitive examples of the realism/irrealism distinction is a claim I haven't explicitly argued for here. What is clear is that REALISM is, unlike its competitors, well-suited for accounting for structural relationships between reduction and realism. Unlike existence views, it can account for the realism of views which are revisionary in the direction of the Vitalist. Unlike mind-independence views, it can account for the distinction when applied to broadly psychological phenomena. And unlike the (absolute) fundamentality view, it can account for the possibility of reductive realism.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>This way of putting things crucially relies on the use of 'degrees' of fundamentality, rather than a simple ordinal fundamentality ranking. It may be possible to state a similar view using a simple ordinal, ranking, though I will not be able to address this question in detail here. The revision will however be substantial and may not be equivalent to the degree-theoretic version of REALISM stated here. But it should in principle be possible to understand REALISM in terms of ordinal rankings because supposition of each of  $T_1$ ,  $T_2$ , and  $T_3$  leaves all of the ancillary claims fixed; as a result there will be a substantial amount of agreement between the fundamentality-rankings on each of the three suppositions. It is then possible to make sense out of the idea that  $D$  falls at higher or lower places on the different rankings. This may be enough to secure a workable variant of REALISM.

<sup>53</sup>One note of caution when evaluating REALISM in light of further examples of the realism/irrealism distinction is needed here. In particular, it is important to keep in mind the different ways in which a reduction can entail a domain to be not-very-fundamental. One way for this to happen is straightforward: if a domain reduces to another not-very-fundamental domain, then it won't be very fundamental. In mathematics, for example, any reduction of numbers to the psychological will count as a theory on which numbers aren't very fundamental. We don't need to know about the character of the reduction—the fact that the reduction basis is psychological activity is enough to know that numbers on the proposed account aren't very fundamental, relatively speaking. But sometimes the character of the reduction does matter significantly to the degree of fundamentality of the reduced domain. Both the Subjectivist and Railton-style reductivist in ethics take on board a psychological reduction basis. For the Subjectivist, wrongness reduces to an agent's actual, contingent wants, whereas for Railton, the reduction basis is facts about an agent's dispositions which ground counterfactuals about what the agent would want in certain counterfactual circumstances (see Railton (1986, 175)). Even the latter reduction basis is psychological—surely most of the dispositions that ground facts about an agent's counterfactual wants are psychological dispositions—but there is still a difference in how fundamental the competing psychological bases are.

Perhaps the most stark illustration of the importance of the character of a reduction is the Berkeleyian idealist, who holds that material objects are just collections of ideas. She has (by her own lights) a highly fundamental reduction basis. What matters is the way in which the Berkeleyian reduces material objects to these highly fundamental entities: she says that they are "collections", but there are lots of these things—many more than what would intuitively go under the heading 'material object'. (One can easily imagine many collections of different colors that have no discernible pattern.) Since there is nothing in the Berkeleyian metaphysics to distinguish ordinary material objects from these other gerrymandered collections of ideas, the Berkeleyian

### 5.3 *Standard shifting*

REALISM leaves open exactly which views might feature in the comparison class for a domain, and exactly how these determine a threshold for realism. We haven't taken a stand on how flexible these parameters are. It might, for instance, be relatively easy to change the composition of the comparison class, for all we have said. But whatever the answer to this (and related questions) is, it surely isn't an obvious one. This opens up space for a natural picture of what nonreductivists like Plantinga, Nagel, and Enoch are up to when they insist that only nonreductivists are realists.

In broad outline, the picture is one on which these speakers are assuming that their speech occurs in a context which determines a strict threshold for realism. They might either do so by assuming that the context determined a strict threshold all along; or, alternatively, by holding that their speech *changes* the context to one which determines a strict threshold.<sup>54</sup> Absent a theory of how, in general, conversational context determines a comparison class, and how that comparison class determines a threshold, we have no means of assessing whether these theorists are correct (in their own contexts) about where the threshold for realism lies. After all, speakers can in principle make mistakes concerning how their context relates to the threshold for their gradable terms, and some attempts to change contextual parameters can fail. Nevertheless, an account of 'realism' as a gradable can treat them as using the term with the same meaning as their linguistic peers. The variability in the usage of these nonreductivists is due entirely to (implicit) assumptions about the contextually variable parameters that are linguistically associated with the term. These assumptions are intelligible; whether they are correct, and hence whether the resulting speeches made by these nonreductivists are *true* are separate (and unanswered) questions.

## 6 Conclusion

REALISM, I have argued, represents a much-improved attempt at an account of the metaphysically natural kind that underlies philosophical talk about 'realism'. Whether it provides a fully *satisfactory* account, given the parameters set out in §1, can be debated. There are two directions in which this question might be further pursued. First, its context-sensitive character belies a sense in which there is no *one* property use of 'realism' denotes. Rather, uses of the term with reference to different domains potentially refer to different degrees of fundamentality. All that prevents us from saying that 'realism' is equivocal across contexts is that which property 'realism' denotes in different contexts varies in semantically predictable

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ends up with a view on which material objects are only as fundamental as these gerrymandered collections—which is to say, it is a view on which material objects are not highly fundamental.

<sup>54</sup>Whether they might be thought to accomplish this by changing the comparison class, or by changing the way in which a comparison class determines a threshold, is a question I won't try to answer here.

ways. Whether this constitutes an account of a *natural* kind that underlies talk of ‘realism’ is a question that might be pursued further.<sup>55</sup>

A second question concerns the metaphysical character of the analysis. Given our gloss on the notion of a comparison class which sets the threshold for ‘realism’ in a context, facts about speakers’ intentions and psychological states will play a large role in determining whether claims about realism are, in a context, true. There is then a decidedly non-metaphysical aspect to the present analysis. But, for any true claim about the realism of a view, there is a robustly metaphysical fact underlying it. As we have presented the notion, facts about relative fundamentality are pure metaphysical facts, and in particular are not determined by anything like the contingent psychological states of speakers in a context. (Though on some views—e.g., Sider (2012, Ch. 3)—relative fundamentality is itself not very fundamental, and hence facts about realism will fail to be substantive metaphysical facts in a different way.) The point can be put in the following way (if we permit use of our earlier neologism): whether the claim that *A* is more realist than *B* is true is a pure, robust metaphysical fact. Nothing about the attitudes or intentions of speakers even in part determines whether it is true.<sup>56</sup> But whether *A* in addition meets the threshold to be called realist *simpliciter* may depend, in part, on contingent psychological features of the context in which the ascription of realism is made. Again, I will leave whether this constitutes success as an open question.

These are open questions which might have answers that are unfavorable to REALISM. To close, I will mention one more point in favor of the account. Many philosophers have found the accounts in terms of existence, mind-independence, and absolute fundamentality to be very compelling accounts of the subject matter. But, if the objections of §§3-4 are correct, these views fail for very straightforward reasons. What can explain their appeal? The REALISM-based account has a simple answer: existence, mind-independence, and absolute fundamentality often stand proxy for a greater degree of fundamentality.

Take existence views first. There are some cases where we, with good reason, restrict the theoretical roles we associate with a term to require that its referent be

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<sup>55</sup>Note that, in answering this question, we won’t be able to do so by *simply* asking whether context-sensitivity is a barrier to naturalness in an analysis. Surely *some* context-sensitive terms have highly unnatural analyses: if the Subjectivist view discussed in this chapter are construed along contextualist lines, the items ‘wrong’ applies to in different contexts will have very little in common, as what Sally disapproves of may be very different from what Sue disapproves of. But this isn’t the case for every context-sensitive term: for instance, contextualists about ‘knows that *p*’ hold that the term expressed different properties in different contexts, but can still give a very natural account of what the instantiators of ‘knows that *p*’ in different contexts have in common. Or, perhaps ‘species’ in biology should be treated as context-sensitive, owing to the fact that different properties in the neighborhood are useful to different areas of biological investigation. Even if this is so, we shouldn’t conclude that species is a highly unnatural kind. The question for REALISM, then, is whether it is similar in the relevant respects to the latter type of context-sensitive analysis.

<sup>56</sup>Of course, this abstracts away from whether the truth of *A* or *B* depends on such facts. All I am claiming here is that the ‘is more realist than’ relation by itself introduces no dependency of this kind.

highly fundamental. One example is found in Schroeder (2005): with theological terms like 'God', one doesn't count as holding that God exists if one accepts a reductive account of their referents. If one identifies the referent of 'God' (as in Schroeder's example) with the strong nuclear force that holds positively charged protons in atomic nuclei together, one does not thereby count as someone who holds that God exists. Finding just *any* existing referent for 'God' does not suffice for theological realism.<sup>57</sup>

A very natural explanation of why this is so presents itself. Suppose there is a truth-preserving interpretation which starts by assigning the strong nuclear force as the referent of 'God', and goes on to give interpretations 'God is a person', 'God created the universe', 'God loves humankind', etc. on which these sentences are true. The problem for this interpretation is that, by beginning with an assignment of the strong nuclear force as the referent of 'God', such an interpretation will be highly gerrymandered and contrived elsewhere. (Consider the interpretation of 'person': it must be a property that applies to not only the strong nuclear force, but also to the referent of 'human', but not to the referent of 'rock', 'planet', or 'number'. Such maneuvers will inevitably require a significant amount of gerrymandering in order to preserve the truth of many ordinary claims.) This suggests that theological terms are not only connected via theoretical role to claims expressed by 'person', 'create', 'love', etc.; the theoretical role attached to theological terms in addition requires that the properties of personhood, creation, love, etc. be *highly fundamental*. Since any interpretation that starts by assigning the strong nuclear force as the referent of 'God' will end up with not-very-fundamental referents for other terms that are closely connected to the theoretical role for 'God', such interpretations are ineligible. 'God exists' only comes out as true when the relevant terms are assigned sufficiently fundamental referents.

The question of theological realism then goes hand-in-hand with the question of the existence of the theological. But this is only because the theological can be expected to be fundamental, if it exists at all. This needn't, however, be true

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<sup>57</sup>See also Manley (2009). For Schroeder, this is because the theoretical role for 'God' requires of its referent that it bear certain properties—the referent of 'God' must be a person, must be capable of creating the world, must love humankind, etc. So we need to find referents for 'person', 'create', 'loves', etc. that apply to the strong nuclear force, but also preserve most of the ordinary truths about persons, creation, and love. Schroeder claims that identifying the referent of 'God' will eventually fail to preserve the truth of related claims involving 'person', 'create', 'loves', etc., and that the attempted reduction of the theological fails because of this. (See Schroeder (2005, 6).)

There is a worry about whether this is really what explains the failure of reductive accounts of the theological to be consistent with 'God exists' on its ordinary meaning. Permutation arguments inspired by Hilary Putnam (1981) claim to show that there will be many truth-preserving interpretations of a language. It isn't obvious that such a permutation isn't available to the theological reductivist who starts off by identifying the referent of 'God' with the strong nuclear force. Whether a relevant permutation is in fact available, however, seems irrelevant to the question of whether the strong nuclear force-theorist has a view on which God exists—of course she doesn't. Placing a fundamentality requirement on admissible interpretations, as described below, explains why an interpretation that starts by assigning the strong nuclear force as the referent of 'God' will fail to yield a candidate English meaning of the term regardless of whether a Putnam-style permutation is available.

for every domain for which the question of realism can arise. Discovering the constitution of polywater needn't show that polywater doesn't exist, as there need not be an expectation that any referent for 'polywater' is a highly fundamental one.<sup>58</sup> More generally, once the domain in question isn't one that can be expected to be highly fundamental if it exists at all, it can still be properly said to *exist* even if it turns out to be highly gerrymandered and unnatural. In these cases, mere existence won't be sufficient for realism about the relevant domain. From the perspective of REALISM, the existence conception provides a sometimes (but not always) useful heuristic for when a view is realist.

REALISM also explains why the mind-independence and fundamentality accounts are tempting. Often, claiming something to be mind-dependent is to claim that it isn't very fundamental: after all, the mind-dependence claim itself is a claim that there is something more fundamental, namely the mind. For this reason, views which entail the mind-dependence of a domain will in general also entail that it fails to satisfy REALISM. But there are exceptions: when the domain in question is explicitly mental, correlations between mind-dependence and comparatively lower degrees of fundamentality go out the window.

Finally, absolute fundamentality will always imply realism—views on which a domain is absolutely fundamental are guaranteed to be views on which the domain meets the contextually set degree of fundamentality required for realism.<sup>59</sup> But the converse need not hold: some views which meet the contextually set degree of fundamentality required for realism need not be views on which the domain is absolutely fundamental. The absolute fundamentality-based view, like the existence and mind-independence-based views, provides in some cases a useful proxy for what is at issue in discussions of realism. But none of these views provide a complete picture; for this we need relative fundamentality.

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<sup>58</sup>Note that there *might* be such an expectation: as we filled out Railton's example earlier, one might, prior to the relevant discovery, associate with 'polywater' a theoretical role that requires it to be of the same kind of molecular constitution as ordinary water. But, we emphasized, this isn't required: one might also continue to use the term 'polywater' with the same meaning after the discovery. One can consistently do this so long as one associates a less strict theoretical role with the term. This kind of case shows how, at least in principle, discovery of a not-very-fundamental reduction basis need not require a denial of the existence of the reduced domain or property.

<sup>59</sup>Moreover, it will always imply bivalence if there is no indeterminacy at the fundamental level. So given this assumption the Dummettian view always correctly categorize views that are realist by virtue of taking their domain to be fundamental.

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