<u>**SOAR Research Proposal, Summer 2017**</u>

Title: Realism, Anti-realism, and the Representation Problem
Faculty Mentor: Dr. Arash Naraghi, Associate Professor of Religion and Philosophy
Student: Michael Bassil
Date: May 30 through August 4

Description:

      The debate between realism and anti-realism dominated much of 20th century Philosophy, and invokes some of the deepest questions about the nature of reality and humans' capacity to apprehend it. Accordingly, its relevance spans far beyond just philosophy, having implications in science, ethics, and beyond. Before anything, it should be noted that 'realism' and 'anti-realism' are not particular theories in themselves, but are blanket terms for a wide variety of different theories that all have something in common. The differences between these particular theories, moreover, are not trivial, and bring about argumentative complexities that I hope to address throughout my research. For clarity, it should also be mentioned that the philosophical grounds covered by realism and anti-realism is essentially twofold: metaphysical and epistemological; metaphysical, as in relating to the world and its fundamental structure, and epistemological, as in relating to knowledge and its nature and acquisition. For the sake of explanation, these components can be considered separately; however, in successfully accounting for either system, realist or anti-realist, they ultimately work in conjunction with each other.

      A realist position is one that, above all, posits the existence of a mind-independent reality. A realist is committed to the notion that the world exists and operates independently of humans' conception of it; this is the metaphysical component to such a theory. Epistemologically speaking, realists tend to believe that human thought and talk is capable of wholly capturing or representing reality. On this view, *truth* is defined simply as the correspondence between human representation of reality and the way reality actually is. In other words, for a proposition to be true is for it to have direct referential relation to some actual *state of affairs*. For example, if the proposition: "this table is red" is assumed true, then there must be some real features of the world which correspond to "table" and "red". How these features are accounted for, metaphysically speaking, is what differentiates particular realist theories. Nevertheless, they all maintain that such entities do exist and claim a space in our ontology. An anti-realist theory, on the other hand, denies the existence of a mind-independent reality. In its most extreme form, this means denying the existence of any world external to the human mind. Weaker forms of anti-realism will concede that an external world exists, but deny that it does so independently of our epistemological situation. Many anti-realists base their attacks against realism on the what's been called the Representation Problem[1]. This problem is as follows: how is it possible for human thought and talk — that is, the linguistic and symbolic mechanisms we use to form propositions — to wholly represent a mind-independent reality? Since this problem deals with our ability to represent a mind-independent reality, of course, it assumes that a mind-independent reality exists; that is, it operates on a metaphysically realist basis. This is precisely why anti-realists reject a mind-independent reality, because they believe the Representation Problem, which is associated with metaphysical realism, to be unsolvable.

      As a result, anti-realists who still want to believe that humans have access to truth cannot define truth under the the correspondence theory. This is because doing so would mean solving the Representation Problem, which anti-realists argue is impossible. Although there is much diversity in how such anti-realists formulate their alternative theories of truth, generally speaking, truth will be dependent on our epistemological situation. In other words, to say that a proposition is true is not to say that it corresponds to some mind-independent state of affairs, but that it satisfies some epistemic conditions. For example, let's again consider the proposition "this table is red." For an

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[1] Khlentzos, Drew. "Challenges to Metaphysical Realism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-sem-challenge/. (accessed March 11, 2017)

anti-realist who believes this proposition is true, "table" and "red" do not represent real features of the world, but human conceptualizations about *perceived* features of the world.

I want to make an important caveat here. Not all realists endorse the correspondence theory of truth. A perfectly consistent position is one that is metaphysically realist while epistemologically anti-realist. That is, it is perfectly consistent to believe in a mind-independent reality whilst rejecting the capability of human thought and talk to wholly represent that reality. I mention this because such realists do not face the Representation Problem, and so many of anti-realist arguments, particularly the one's I'm interested in, do not apply. That being said, the ultimate aim of my research is not realism, *per se*, but scientific realism. A scientific realist endorses two major claims: 1) that there is a mind-independent reality and 2) that this reality can be successfully represented by scientific theories. In other words, you cannot have scientific realism without presupposing both metaphysical and epistemological realism, and so these are the kind of realists that will be addressed in my research.

Ultimately, I'm interested in the representational status of the scientific domain of thought and talk. Many of us take for granted that scientific theories and language fully represent a mind-independent reality. I am privy to this bias as well, but I recognize it's deep, and admittedly controversial, philosophical assumptions. An alternative characterization of scientific theories, which can still maintain that they are *true*, is one which sees scientific theories as very rigorous and internally consistent human constructions which can explain the reality we perceive, but do not fundamentally represent it. My question, ultimately, is in which approach, realist or anti-realist, is best applied to scientific theories.

I will begin my research by learning about the major figures and theories for both realism and anti-realism, the important criticisms against them, their defenses against those criticisms, and whether or not I think any exchanges are decisive. Then, I will use what I've learned to characterize the general debate between realism and anti-realism. I will explore the major arguments against realism, realism's defenses against those arguments, the major arguments against anti-realism, and anti-realism's defenses against those arguments. Taking all this in, I will come to a conclusion as to whether I think the issue is ultimately decisive or still open. All of the above will culminate into a paper on the subject. The conclusion reached in this paper will motivate how my research will progress. If it turns out that anti-realism is the decisive victor, then I will have no choice but to deny realism about science, and instead explore in greater detail what an anti-realist account of scientific theory should look like. This, I expect, will entail exploring the conceptual underpinnings of science; concepts like *causation*, *emergence*, and so forth. If it turns out that realism is more convincing, however, then I will have to do additional research as to whether or not it applies to scientific theories; just because it is possible for human thought and talk to wholly represent a mind-independent reality does not mean that scientific theories do so. That is, one can be an epistemological realist without believing that science is capable of successfully representing objective reality; the belief that science represents objective reality must be qualified separately. Whichever path it takes, this aspect of my research will be beyond the SOAR project, and will likely consist in an Honor's project.

Roles and Responsibilities:
Faculty Responsibilities:
- ➢ Guide the student towards the best sources of research.
- ➢ Share and critique research in progress.
- ➢ Engage the student in philosophical discussion.
- ➢ Meet regularly with the student.
- ➢ Verify proper understanding of views and arguments.
- ➢ Ensure that the project stays on schedule.
- ➢ Edit the student's written work.
- ➢ Establish scholarly standards for the student's work so that it may be disseminated in the best way possible (i.e., undergraduate conferences and journals)

Student Responsibilities:
  - ➢ Read and Research: examine thoroughly all positions and their objections so as to be up to date with the most current research on the topic.
  - ➢ Critical Discussion: by attending regular meetings with the SOAR advisor, the student will engage in rigorous philosophical discussions.
  - ➢ Formulate Views: develop an original and strong thesis and outline for the project.
  - ➢ Formulate Arguments: defend the intended position using well constructed arguments.
  - ➢ Formulate Objections: identify and address all possible objections to the thesis.
  - ➢ Writing: the student will be expected to write a paper of scholarly worth with the aims of being published.

Timetable:

Week	Topic
1	Important realist and anti-realist figures and theories, the arguments against each theory and their defenses. For realism: Plato, Paul A. Boghossian, and maybe others. For anti-realism: Michael Dummett, Hilary Putnam, Quine, and Richard Rorty. Write first half of paper on this.
2	
3	
4	
5	General account of the realist/anti-realist debate, arguments against both sides and their defenses. Write second half of paper on this.
6	
7	
8	
9	Conclusion: Is the issue decisive? Finalize first draft of paper.
10	Finish paper and prepare the direction of future research regarding the representational status of scientific theories.

Description of Discipline-Appropriate Scholarly Research:
A substantial portion of the research process will consist of literature review. Relevant writings will be thoroughly evaluated in order to properly discuss them in my paper and fit them within the larger aim of my research. First, positions in defense of realism from important figures such Plato and Paul A. Boghossian will be looked at. Afterwards, major anti-realist philosophers such as Michael Dummett, Hilary Putnam, Quine, and Richard Rorty will be explored. This information will be used as the background from which to explore additional academic writings about the arguments surrounding the more general debate between realism and anti-realism.

Contribution to Field and Community:
I believe the novelty of my research which makes it a valuable contribution to the discipline of Philosophy is the fact that, unlike many other works on the same issue, it will be done in the context of ultimately being applied to science. This interdisciplinary focus is what differentiates my work from others which typically approach this topic from a purely philosophical standpoint.
I plan to present what I learn from this project at Moravian's Philosophy conference and Philosophy club as a way to acquire input and stimulate local discussion on this issue amongst students and faculty. I also hope to present my work at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research and will consider submitting my paper for publication if I feel it is strong enough.

<u>**Student Statement of Purpose**</u>

Title: Realism, Anti-realism, and the Representation Problem
Student: Michael Bassil, Biology Major, 2019
Faculty: Dr. Arash Naraghi
On Campus Housing: Not requested

Rationale:

My primary purpose for doing this SOAR Project is to challenge myself and sharpen my intellect and cognitive tools. As a Biology major with hopes for Dental School, I feel that I've already engaged with and will have plenty of opportunities to further engage with scientific knowledge. As such, although I see the value and benefit of scientific research, I feel more inclined towards other areas of research that will challenge me to think in a new and different kind of way. I think the critical thinking and analytic abilities exercised by studying Philosophy will benefit me greatly in my journey of becoming and eventually being a dentist. I also want to mention that my relationship with Philosophy is not new. I've already taken three philosophy courses at my previous university, and am currently taking one here at Moravian. Included in the three courses that I took at my prior university is *Metaphysics and Epistemology* with Ray Brassier. I mention this because it is the one most relevant to my SOAR research interests, and Brasser is a well-known philosopher in this area whom I learned a great deal from.

Concerning the actual content of my research, I've already hinted that my interest in the realist/anti-realist debate is primarily motivated by a larger purpose of answering the question about the representational status of scientific thought and talk. The dominant view in science, it seems, is of realist origin; that is, most scientists and people sympathetic to science believe, albeit implicitly, that scientific theories represent the world as it objectively is. Of course, such a view is not by itself scientific but, rather, philosophical, and must be defended as such. I want to be cautious here, my concern is not whether or not scientific theories are *true*. Rather, my concern is in what sense can we say that they are true. Are they true because they directly correspond to a mind-independent reality? Or, is it because they they are defined as such within a conceptual (and admittedly very powerful) framework that humans have invented? That being said, I don't expect to reach quite this far in my SOAR research alone. My SOAR project will be primarily focused on the realist/anti-realist debate and, I suspect, will only touch on its scientific implications towards the end. Therefore, although my ultimate goal is applying what I learn about the realist/anti-realist debate to science, doing so will have to be designated towards a future project, perhaps an Honors Project or some other form of independent study.

Expectations:

I expect to finish my SOAR project with a highly developed paper and a strong sense of achievement! Additionally, I expect to have a much more thorough and sophisticated perspective about some of the deepest questions humans can ask. Admittedly, it's never clear whether there ever are determinate answers to such questions. Nevertheless, it's my opinion that there is always something to be gained from such an endeavor, no matter how distant from concrete reality it may seem. By advancing bravely towards these big questions about truth, reality, and the like, despite any guarantee of clear answers, we exercise one of our deepest human propensities: curiosity in the face of the unknown.