

## Australian Philosophy - A distinctive tradition

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A realist theory of some kind of thing says that that kind of thing really exists. Atoms ... forces ... moral values ... are there really such things? A realist theory says there are - they're part of the "furniture of the universe". A non-realist theory (called in different contexts idealism, or instrumentalism, or postmodernism) says there aren't - those "things" are just ways of speaking, or "all in the mind", or "socially constructed".

Of course, it is possible to be realist about some things but not others. Almost everyone is realist about physical objects and other minds (not forgetting, though, that a newborn baby has to work hard to get to that position: it takes about three years before an infant has a proper "theory of other minds" and understands other people have beliefs like but possibly different from his/her own). Some other "things" are ones that no-one is realist about. If one says "The average Londoner is a suburban accountant with 1.7 children", it's understood that there is no entity "the average Londoner" - it's just a way of speaking that we could rephrase more literally as about the number of children of all Londoners.

Some entities are much harder to decide about. What about forces? Are there really such things, or are they just a "theoretical construct" of physics to help interpret equations of motion? Here is an argument for their reality: press your index fingers together. Now press them

together twice as hard. What is the difference? It is natural to think that the fingers are feeling two actual forces, one twice the other. So the reality of the forces explains the feeling. (However, it is possible to argue that what is felt is not a force but a different shape of the fingers, including at the molecular level.) This is just an example of how debates about realism work, and how they can soon get into tricky territory.

In my book *Corrupting the Youth: A History of Philosophy in Australia*, I argued that Australian philosophy, and particularly Sydney philosophy, has had a strong realist tendency (compared to, e.g. American or British or French philosophy). Undoubtedly a principal cause of this was the long reign of John Anderson as Challis Professor of Philosophy at Sydney University for thirty years in the mid-twentieth century.

I'll just briefly mention two current leading Australian realist philosophers.

David Armstrong was Anderson's student and later also Challis Professor at Sydney for almost thirty years, beginning in 1964. (He is still active and lives in Glebe Point Road.) He is especially known for his realism about universals. Universals are the properties things have in common - shape, colour etc. Should we regard the universe as containing (in addition to things), the properties of things? Is there, besides you, such a thing as your height (which you may share with other people)? Or should we say, on the contrary, that heights, colours, etc are like "the average Londoner" - just ways of speaking about particular things? Here is an argument for realism about colours: "Orange is more like red than it is like blue" is a true statement that can't be paraphrased so as to mention just orange or blue things. It's really about the colours themselves. Armstrong argues that it's the properties

of things that give them their causal power (e.g. the power to be observed) so science is really about (real) universals.

Rai Gaita, the subject of the recent film *Romulus My Father* is best known in the philosophy world for his book *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*. As the title suggests, he takes a realist view of moral values. He argues that if we were to tell someone who'd suffered some terrible evil such as torture that there was no objectivity to the terribleness of evil - that, say, each tribe could decide arbitrarily for itself what did and didn't count as evil - then we would not only have advanced a false theory but would have committed a moral offence against the victim.

Finally, let me advertise three projects of mine in the realist direction:

My recent book, *Catholic Values and Australian Realities* argues that the Catholic tradition has advanced the correct view of the realist foundations of ethics - a "natural law" theory based on the real worth of persons, contrasting both with a divine command view and a naturalist view that sees ethics as simply a product of evolution and custom

*The Restraint Project*, an examination of the virtue of temperance or self-control in the Australian context. (There is casual work available on it.)

The "Sydney School" in the philosophy of mathematics, which defends a view of mathematics as a science about certain real aspects of the world, such as symmetry and continuity