

Realism without Representation: A Response to Appiah

Author(s): Michael Devitt

Source: *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, Vol. 61, No. 1/2, The Twenty-Ninth Oberlin Colloquium in Philosophy (Feb., 1991), pp. 75-77

Published by: [Springer](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4320170>

Accessed: 15/05/2011 11:44

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=springer>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Springer is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*.

REALISM WITHOUT REPRESENTATION:  
A RESPONSE TO APPIAH

(Received 14 March, 1990)

I distinguish the metaphysical thesis, *Realism*, from any semantic thesis. Anthony Appiah agrees with me that “the metaphysical thesis is what many traditional arguments are really about” (RR: 65). However, he disagrees in seeing this thesis as, in part, *implicitly* semantic.

In my paper, I allow that *Realism* is “a little bit epistemological” in that it denies that the world is dependent on what we believe (ARD: 53). Appiah is quite right in thinking that, in a similar negative respect, *Realism* is a little bit semantic too. So that is not what our disagreement is about.

I think that no semantic claim, aside from this little bit, is *constitutive* of *Realism*. However, Appiah overstates my point in describing it as the view that *Realism* “should make no difference to our semantical beliefs” (RR: 68). This leads him to see disagreements where there are none. Different metaphysics can make different semantics seem plausible or implausible; in particular, *Realism* can make verificationism seem implausible. Similarly, different semantics can make different metaphysics seem plausible or implausible; in particular, verificationism can make *Realism* seem implausible (ARD: 54–55). There are ways of *arguing* from a position on the one issue to a position on the other. And, of course, as Appiah indicates (RR: 72), one might mount an argument that has conclusions on *both* issues; say, verificationism *and* antirealism. Knowledge is a seamless web, as Quine told us long ago. Everything in the web can make a difference to everything else. All of this is beside the point being criticized, for that point is about what *Realism is*, not about the arguments for it or from it.

Our first real disagreement comes with Appiah’s argument that a certain semantic theory — a truth-conditional theory including a causal theory of reference — does entail *Realism* (his “Big-R Realism”) (RR: 70–71). I do not see the force of his argument. On this theory, as he

says, “it is hardly surprising . . . that most of the terms succeed sometimes in referring to *something*” (RR: 70). Nevertheless, the theory does not entail this. Furthermore, it does not entail that any *particular* term refers, hence not that any *particular* entity exists. In brief, it does not yield the existence dimension of *Realism*. Further still, it does not yield the independence dimension. So it could hardly be further from entailing *Realism*. Of course, if we add the two dimensions of *Realism* to the semantic theory, *then* it entails *Realism*. But if we added the doctrine of the Trinity, it would entail that too.

“Fig-Leaf Realism” is committed only to their being *something* “out there.” *Realism* is committed to entities of certain types being “out there.” Which types? Appiah’s main disagreement with me comes with his argument that the only way we can *identify* the relevant entities is as the referents of our representations.

What is the problem? I identify the entities by giving some examples: stones, trees, cats, electrons, muons, curved space-time, atoms, and molecules. I call such entities “common-sense, and scientific, physical” entities in my statement of *Realism* (ARD: 45). What is unclear about that? If a person has difficulty catching onto the idea, I could continue the list, right to the end if necessary (1984: 19). Or I could say a word about how we construct the list: we look to our best science and common sense. For, we have good reason to believe in the existence of entities that our best science and common sense say exist. There is no *genuine* problem identifying the entities that *Realism* is committed to.

This having been said, I have no objection to identifying the entities using reference, as Appiah wants. We could state *Realism* as follows:

*Realism*#: Most referring expressions of common-sense, and scientific, theories refer to objective and mind-independent entities

However, first, this no more makes *Realism* semantic than does stating it as *Realism*\* (ARD: 45–46). And Appiah agrees that *Realism*\* does not make *Realism* semantic (RR: 65). Where *Realism*\* uses deflationary truth, *Realism*# uses deflationary reference. That is to say, *Realism*# requires a notion of reference no stronger than one that makes all appropriate instance of

*e* refers if and only if *a* exists

hold. (Appropriateness is a matter of synonymy, as before: what is substituted for 'e' must name an expression that is synonymous with what is substituted for 'a'.) Deflationary reference is a logical device that involves no commitment to any substantive semantic thesis about the representational properties of language. Indeed, it is compatible with an eliminativist semantics (like Quine's, for example).

Second, though *Realism#* is unobjectionable, it is no advance over *Realism*. If there were a genuine problem of identification in the latter case, there would be an analogous problem in the former. Someone might ask Appiah *which* expressions in *which* theories concern *Realism#*. Appiah could give some examples, just as I did before of entities. Someone who doggedly refused to understand how, and on what basis, I would continue the earlier list could be just as difficult with Appiah and his list. And I would be sympathetic if Appiah felt more than a little bit impatient with such doggedness.

#### REFERENCES

- Appiah, Anthony. "Representations and Realism." This issue, pp. 65–74. (RR)  
Devitt, Michael. 1984. *Realism and Truth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press  
Devitt, Michael. "Aberrations of the Realism Debate." This issue, pp. 43–63. (ARD)

*Department of Philosophy*  
*University of Maryland*  
*College Park, MD 20742*  
*U.S.A.*