

Metaphysics

Also by Peter van Inwagen

An Essay on Free Will
Material Beings

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To my daughter,
ELIZABETH CORE VAN INWAGEN

Dimensions of Philosophy Series

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PART ONE

The Way the World Is

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IN CHAPTERS 2 THROUGH 4, our topic will be the World. Or, rather, our topic will be most of the World, for human beings—who, like all other things, are parts of the World—will be the special topic of Part Three.

Ordinary people, the people you pass on the street every day, have widely differing conceptions of the World. A Roman Catholic or an Orthodox Jew will have one sort of conception of the World, an atheist a very different conception, and a Hindu yet a third conception, one that differs greatly from the conceptions of the Catholic and the Jew and from the conception of the atheist. Are these examples intended to imply that when we are talking about conceptions of the World we are talking about religion? Well, only accidentally. For one thing, the atheist will no doubt stoutly insist that atheism is not a religion. (Let us take the person we are calling "the atheist" to be a typical Western atheist—the sort of atheist you would be likely to encounter in Europe or one of the English-speaking countries—and not a Japanese Zen Buddhist or any such exotic atheist as that.) For another, most of the five billion or so people in the world practice some religion, and every religion involves some sort of conception of the World. As a consequence, most people get their conceptions of the World wholly or partly from their religions. But not everyone does, and the things that are typically involved in a religion—things such as ritual, the veneration of sacred objects or persons or places, and characteristically religious emotions.

The differences between the Catholic and the Jew, on the one hand, and the atheist, on the other, are obvious. The Catholic and the Jew both think that the basis of the World is personal: each believes that there is a Person—a conscious Being who acts for reasons and carries out plans—who caused everything besides Himself to exist. And the atheist does not. The atheist thinks that the World existed before there had ever been any persons, and that the first persons there ever were came to be as a by-product of various purposeless processes going on here and there in the World. One might suppose that there

could be no more profound disagreement about the nature of the World than this. And yet the atheist shares with the Catholic and the Jew many important metaphysical beliefs that would be rejected by the Hindu. All three of the "Westerners" believe that the things they see around them are real, and that these things have the features, or many of the features, that they seem to have. All three of them would probably give their assent to the following statement.

Buildings and trees and grass and the sun and the stars are all real. Each building, each tree, each blade of grass, each star, is an object distinct from the others, and each has a certain set of properties. That building is one thing and that tree is another. The tree weighs a certain number of kilograms, even if no human being knows just how many kilograms that is. Each of them is at a certain *distance* from me. Either the tree is forty meters away from me or it is some other perfectly definite distance away. And if it is forty meters away, then anyone who thinks it's thirty meters away from me is just wrong. If Jane insists that the tree is thirty meters away from me when it is really forty meters away, she is wrong because her beliefs do not match the way things are. The tree and its properties exist independently of Jane's beliefs and of anything else that belongs to her mind, and it is up to the contents of her mind to correspond to external reality, just as it is up to a map to correspond to the territory. If the contents of her mind do not match external reality, if they do not correspond with the independently existing facts, then she has a picture of the world that is at least partly false.

The properties of the tree, moreover, are not exhausted by the properties it has at the present moment. The tree has a certain *age*. There is a certain time in the past at which it began to exist. Before that, for ages and ages, things came to be and flourished and passed away, and the tree did not yet exist. Although there was an all but unimaginably long (perhaps even an infinite) period during which the tree did not yet exist, it is nevertheless *now* true that the tree has existed for quite a long time: it was here yesterday, and it was here the day before, and the day before that and so on through a series of many thousands of days. And this is no mere manner of speaking. This use of the pronoun 'it' should be taken literally. The tree (this very tree) was here last year, even though it then had a slightly different set of properties from those it has now. (For example, it probably had a different number of leaves then.) But it was the *same* tree. And the tree can change its position as well as its properties. Not only is the tree being carried around the sun by the earth, but one could uproot the tree and carry it to the opposite side of the earth and re-plant it there, and it would be the same tree at every moment during this sequence of events.

Furthermore, the tree and all of the other things we have mentioned exert influences on one another. The light of the sun falls on the grass and the tree and the building and me and warms us: it is no accident that an object gets warmer when it moves from shadow to sunlight; the warming happens because the sunlight has an *effect* on the object. And it is only

because these things have effects on me that I am able to perceive them. The perceptions I have of the tree or the building are due to influences that cross the space that separates me from those objects and cause changes in my sense-organs and my brain.

The Hindu—at least the well-educated Hindu who understands the full implications of Hinduism—will agree with none of this. The Hindu will insist that to say that this statement describes how things really are is to mistake appearance for reality. And it is not only a Hindu who would say this. This point of view is confined neither to religion nor to the Far East. Many Western philosophers, particularly in the nineteenth century, would have agreed with our Hindu and would have given philosophical arguments to back up their assertions. Many more Western philosophers would not go so far as to reject the entirety of this statement but would reject certain parts of it, particularly those having to do with space and time, the cause-and-effect relation, and perception.

Let us say that the above passage—the passage I said the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox Jew and the atheist would all give their assent to and the Hindu would not—represents the Common Western Metaphysic,¹ that is, the core of metaphysical belief that is common to most of the views of the World that are held by ordinary, unreflective people in Europe and the English-speaking countries.² Since most of the readers of this book will no doubt be Westerners, let us take the Common Western Metaphysic as a starting point for our discussion of the way the World is. Since most of us are Westerners, it is not surprising that most of us will find this metaphysic to be obviously right. But is it *really* right? Does the Common Western Metaphysic describe things as they really are or only as they apparently are?

We shall use this question to organize our discussion of the way the World is. It would require a work of many volumes even to touch briefly on all of the important metaphysical issues raised by the question whether a statement of the Common Western Metaphysic is a description of appearance or reality. We shall be able to discuss only three of these issues in detail. We shall discuss them under the three headings *Individuality*, *Externality*, and *Objectivity*.

(continued...)

Objectivity

capital of New York State and is false if and only if Albany is *not* the capital of New York State. If Berkeley believes that nothing exists independently of the mind, then what he believes is true if and only if nothing exists independently of the mind, and what he believes is false if and only if something exists independently of the mind. If two people, you and I, say, have the same belief about something—perhaps we both believe that Albany is the capital of New York State—then truth or falsity is conferred on our common belief by the features of that one object. Truth is therefore “one”; there is no such thing as a belief or assertion being “true for me” but “not true for you.” If your friend Alfred responds to something you have said with the words, “That may be true for you, but it isn’t true for me,” his words can only be regarded as a rather misleading way of saying, “That may be what you think, but it’s not what I think.”

Before we go further, it will be necessary to clear up a possible confusion. Many fair-minded people seem to object to the notion of objective truth and falsity because they believe that it implies some sort of dogmatism. They seem to think that if Mary says that all of our beliefs and assertions are either objectively true or objectively false, then Mary must be setting herself up as an arbiter of that objective truth and falsity. “Who’s to say what’s true and what’s false?” they ask. But Mary is not committed by her belief in the objectivity of truth and falsity to the claim that she is in a position to lay down the law about what’s true and what’s false. Indeed, she is not committed to the thesis that *anyone* is in the position to lay down the law about what’s true and what’s false. She is committed only to the thesis that truth and falsity exist and are (in general) conferred on beliefs and assertions independently of what is going on in the minds of the people who have those beliefs and make those assertions. One example should suffice to make this clear. Consider the question whether there is intelligent life on other planets. “Who’s to say whether there’s intelligent life on other planets?” Who, indeed? In my view, no human being at this point in history is in a position to lay down the law on this question. But saying that is perfectly consistent with saying that either there is intelligent life on other planets or there isn’t and that the statement that there is intelligent life on other planets is made true (if it is true) or made false (if it is false) by objective facts about the way things are on distant planets.

The thesis that each of our beliefs and assertions is either true or false, if it is to be at all plausible, requires two qualifications, qualifications that most adherents of the Common Western Metaphysic will be willing to make. The first is that it may well be that some of our utterances are meaningless, although they do not seem to us to be meaningless when we make them—otherwise, we should no doubt not make them. (We have seen, for example, that the logical positivists held that all metaphysical utterances were meaningless. But they did not hold that metaphysical utterances seemed to the metaphysicians who made them to be meaningless.) In the works of the nineteenth-century American Absolute Idealist Josiah Royce, there occurs the following sentence: “The world is a progressively self-realizing community of interpretation.” Perhaps these words mean nothing at all—perhaps, as we say, they are “just words”—despite the fact that many people have thought that they meant

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Objectivity

ONE IMPORTANT COMPONENT of the Common Western Metaphysic is the thesis that there is such a thing as objective truth. This thesis itself has two components. First, our beliefs and our assertions are either true or false; each of our beliefs and assertions represents the World as being a certain way, and the belief or assertion is true if the World is that way, and false if the World is not that way. It is, as one might put it, up to our beliefs and assertions to get the World right; if they don’t, they’re not doing their job, and that’s their fault and no fault of the World’s. Our beliefs and assertions are thus related to the World as a map is related to the territory: it is up to the map to get the territory right, and if the map doesn’t get the territory right, that’s the fault of the map and no fault of the territory.

The second component of the thesis that there is such a thing as objective truth is this: the World exists and has the features it does in large part independently of our beliefs and our assertions. (I say ‘in large part’ because our beliefs and assertions are themselves parts—very minor parts, it would seem—of the World. And, of course, our beliefs and assertions may *affect* other parts of the World, as when my false belief that the traffic light is green causes an accident. But even the totality of all of the parts of the physical universe affected by the beliefs and assertions of all human beings would seem to be a very small part of the universe: if we learn nothing else from astronomy and geology, we learn that the physical universe as a whole would be pretty much the way it is if there had never been any human beings.) The truth or falsity of our beliefs and assertions is therefore “objective” in the sense that truth and falsity are conferred on those beliefs and assertions by their objects, by the things they are *about*.

And how do the objects of our beliefs and assertions confer truth on them? The idea that the objects of our beliefs and assertions have this power may seem mysterious if we think about it in the abstract, but the mystery vanishes if we look at one or two concrete examples. If I assert that Albany is the capital of New York State, then what I have asserted is true if and only if Albany is the

something true and important. If this sentence is indeed meaningless, then the thesis that each of our beliefs and assertions is either true or false does not properly understood, mean that someone who utters this sentence says something that is either true or false, for that person says nothing at all.

The second qualification that is needed has to do with vagueness. Many, perhaps almost all, of the words that we use in everyday life are vague. That is, there will be possible—and usually actual—cases in which it is not clear whether a certain word can be correctly applied. For example, if a man is 181.5 centimeters (5 feet 11-1/2 inches) tall, there is perhaps no definite answer to the question whether he is "tall." The word "tall" is therefore vague, and the statement that Alfred (who is 181.5 centimeters tall) is tall cannot be said to be either true or false. The thesis that each of our beliefs and assertions is either true or false therefore requires this qualification: because some of the words and phrases that we use in making our assertions or formulating our beliefs are vague, there will sometimes be no definite yes-or-no answer to the question whether these words and phrases apply to the things we are talking about. As a consequence, some of our beliefs and assertions will be neither true nor false. Let us call these beliefs and assertions *indeterminate*. Believers in objective truth and falsity do not deny the existence of indeterminate beliefs and assertions. They simply insist that the status "indeterminate" is as much an objective status of certain beliefs and assertions as "truth" and "falsity" are of certain others. If, for example, Alfred's hero-worshipping ten-year-old brother believes that Alfred is tall, facts that exist independently of the boy's mind confer the status "indeterminate" on his belief. In the remainder of this chapter, I will simplify the discussion by ignoring the status "indeterminate"; I will talk as if the thesis of the objectivity of truth implied that every belief and assertion was either true or false. That is, I will ignore the existence of vagueness, which is not really germane to the questions we shall be considering.

Before leaving the topic of vagueness and what it implies about truth and falsity, however, I want to make just one more point. The fact that our language contains vague words and phrases does not entail that a given assertion (or belief) cannot be true or false unless it can be made (or formulated) without the use of vague terms. If that were so, few if any of our assertions or beliefs would be either true or false, owing to the fact that all or most of the terms that we use in our daily speech are vague. Most of the assertions that we make using vague terms manage to be either true or false, owing to the fact that for just about any vague term there are perfectly clear cases of things that that term applies to, and people do not normally use a term if they are in any doubt about whether that term applies to whatever they are talking about. While there are certainly cases of people who cannot be clearly said to be "tall" and cannot be clearly said to be "not tall," there are also many cases in which the term clearly applies or clearly does not apply—for example, men who are 200 centimeters tall, or men who are 150 centimeters tall. Thus, anyone who says that Bertram (who is 200 centimeters [6 feet 7 inches] tall) is tall says something true, and anyone who says that Charles (who is 150 centimeters [4 feet 11 inches] tall) is tall says something false.

With these two qualifications of the thesis that each of our assertions and beliefs is either true or false in mind, let us return to our discussion of the question of objective truth.

The most interesting thing about objective truth is that there are people who deny that it exists. One might wonder how anyone could deny that there is such a thing as objective truth. At least I might. In fact, I often have. For some people, I am fairly sure, the explanation is something like this. They are deeply hostile to the thought of anything that in any sense stands in judgment over them. The idea toward which they are most hostile is, of course, the idea of there being a God. But they are almost as hostile to the idea of there being an objective universe that doesn't care what they think and could make their most cherished beliefs false without even consulting them. (But this cannot be the whole story, since there are people who deny that objective truth exists and who also believe in God. What motivates these people is a *complete* mystery to me.) Let the reader be warned. It must be evident that I am unable to enter into the smallest degree of imaginative sympathy with those who deny that there is such a thing as objective truth. I am therefore probably not a reliable guide to their views. Perhaps, indeed, I do not understand these views. I would prefer to believe this. I would prefer to believe that no one actually believes what, on the surface, at least, it very much looks as if some people believe.

Philosophers who deny the existence of objective truth are today usually called "anti-realists"—in opposition, of course, to "realists," who affirm the existence of objective truth. This is confusing, because, in our discussion of the external world, we have opposed realism to *idealism*, in the thesis that everything that exists is a mind or a modification of a mind. (And it was no arbitrary decision on my part to use the term 'realism' this way. In opposing "realism" to idealism, I was following customary usage.) It could be argued that it is not entirely misleading to use the word 'realism' both for the thesis that is opposed to idealism and for the thesis that is opposed to "anti-realism." Is not idealism essentially the thesis that there is no mind-independent world "out there" for our sensations to be correct or incorrect representations of? And is not anti-realism the thesis that there is no mind-independent world "out there" for our assertions to be true or false statements about? Since the two theses are both rejections of a mind-independent world, is it so very misleading to oppose both of them to "realism," the thesis that there is a so-called real—that is, mind-independent—world?

This plausible-sounding argument depends on confusing two different senses of 'mind-independent'. The idealist who says that nothing is independent of the mind means that the nature of everything there is is mental: every modification of various minds. Nevertheless, according to the idealist, the general nature of reality, the way the World is, *how things are*, is something that does not depend on the mind. (Not even on the mind of God, although, of course, vast ranges of particular fact depend on His decisions—just as much smaller ranges of particular fact depend on your decisions and mine.) The anti-realist who says that nothing is independent of the mind, however, really does mean something very much like this: the collective activity of all minds is

somehow determinative of the general nature of reality. What exactly the anti-realist does mean is a question we shall have to turn to in a moment. For the present, we must simply note that although the idealist and the anti-realist may both use the words 'nothing is independent of the mind', they mean something very different by these words. It is therefore misleading to oppose "realism" to both idealism and anti-realism.

Let us respect both the traditional opposition of realism and idealism and the current tendency to use 'realism' for the thesis that there is an objective truth; we can carry out this resolution by the simple expedient of retaining the traditional opposition of 'realism' and 'idealism' and calling the thesis that there is an objective truth 'Realism' with a capital R. (The thesis that there is no objective truth, or that the way the World is is mind-dependent, will, of course, be called anti-Realism.)

What, then, is the thesis of anti-Realism? I confess that I have had a very hard time finding a statement of this thesis that I can understand. I find, in fact, that I am much better at understanding examples of how particular "truths" or "facts" that would be supposed by most people to be independent of the mind are in fact (according to the anti-Realists) mind-dependent than I am at understanding formulations of anti-Realism as a general doctrine. Let us look at an example of such a particular truth and see what light it can give us. Here is an example of a fact that most people would say was in no way dependent upon the existence of the human mind or any activity of or fact about the human mind:

Mount Everest is 8,847.7 meters high.

Let us call this fact 'F'. F would seem to be a pretty good example of a fact that most people would take to be in any reasonable sense independent of human mental activity. The reasons that underlie this conviction might be articulated and presented in the form of an argument in the following way. This argument, while it may appeal to some scientific facts that not everyone is familiar with (and some people will reject the assumption it contains that human beings are the product of an evolutionary process), can certainly be said—scientific details aside—to represent the metaphysical point of view of the ordinary person:

The forces that cause mountains to rise have never been in the smallest degree influenced by the evolutionary processes that produced human beings. If no human beings had ever evolved, and if no other intelligent beings inhabited the earth, the vast, slow collision of the Indian subcontinent with the continent of Asia, which is what caused (and is still causing) the rise of the Himalayan Mountains, would have occurred in exactly the fashion that it did. And, as a consequence, if there had never been any intelligent beings on the earth, Mount Everest would, despite the absence of intelligence from the terrestrial scene, have exactly the size and shape it has in fact. If you think about it, this conclusion is presupposed by most explanations that geologists give of the present-day features of the

earth, for these explanations presuppose that the processes that shaped these features had been going on for unimaginably long periods during which there were no intelligent beings to observe them or to think about them. Now since Mount Everest would be of exactly the size and shape it actually is even if there had never been any minds, it is obvious that the fact F is entirely independent of all human mental activity. If there were no beings with minds, there would be no one to observe or grasp or be aware of this fact, but the fact would still be there.

This argument, it will be noted, presupposes that common objects can exist independently of the mind and therefore presupposes the falsity of idealism, and the idealists, as we have said, are no friends of anti-Realism. Still, we have found reason to reject idealism, and there seems to be no reason to restrict ourselves to the use of arguments that would be acceptable to idealists. (I am tempted to say: Let the idealists find their own arguments against anti-Realism.) There is, however, one argument that Berkeley has used against this kind of reasoning, an argument that an anti-Realist might want to appropriate, and we had better take a moment to examine it. It is this: it is impossible to imagine geological processes—or anything else—going on independently of the mind, for if you try, you will find that you have to imagine *yourself* (or at least *someone*) present and watching the processes take place; therefore, you do not succeed in your attempt to imagine the processes in question going on independently of the mind. (Most undergraduates will probably have heard the similar argument for the conclusion that it is impossible for one to imagine one's own funeral: one would have to imagine oneself there, watching what was going on, so one would not really be imagining oneself *dead*, so one would not really be imagining one's funeral.)

This argument is without force, however. Even if we grant the point that one cannot imagine, in the sense of "form a mental image of," an event that no one is observing, the argument is without force. (But that point is very doubtful. Isn't it like saying that a painter can never paint a picture of someone who is alone, since any attempt to do so represents the figure in the painting as being observed by someone who is occupying a certain point of view—the point of view that the viewer of the painting is invited, in imagination, to share?) The above argument for the mind-independence of F does not require that those to whom the argument is addressed form a *mental image* of unobserved geological processes but only that they understand certain verbal descriptions of those processes.

What does the anti-Realist say about F? How can the anti-Realist continue to maintain that the way the World is is dependent on human mental activity in the face of the fact that the size and shape of Mount Everest were determined by geological processes that operated mostly before and always independently of the biological processes that produced intelligent life? The argument goes something like this:

Mountains and height are human social constructs. Let us first consider mountains. It is a human fiction, one that has gained currency because it

serves certain social needs, that a certain portion of the earth's topography can be marked off and called a "mountain." What are the boundaries of Mount Everest? If you look at the place where these boundaries are supposed to be, you will not find any line on the surface of the earth; you will find only homogeneous rock. If you want to find out where Mount Everest begins and ends, you will discover that you have to apply to certain social institutions for your answer—the International Geographical Union or some such. And the answer you get will not be dictated by some "reality" that is independent of the activities of human beings. The International Geographical Union—or whoever is responsible for such decisions—might just as well ("just as well" as far as any mind-independent reality enters into the matter) have decided that a "mountain" began at the tree line, and they might have decided to call what we call the part of the mountain that is below the tree line the 'mountain base'. The fact that they made the decision they did about the boundaries of mountains and not some other decision has a social explanation, like any other social fact. Perhaps it is this: some people want to or have to climb mountains, and it serves their purposes to draw the boundaries around "mountains" at the place where the specifically human activity called climbing has to start. (Intelligent birds would not have that particular purpose; they might well draw the boundaries around "mountains" differently—if, indeed, they drew any such boundaries at all.) Mountains, therefore, are social constructs. So is height. You can't drop a weighted rope from the peak of Mount Everest to the ground and then measure the rope with a meter stick and call the result the height of Mount Everest. We therefore have to use a special instrument called a theodolite to measure the height of Mount Everest. But why do we call the figure that a certain procedure involving a theodolite gives us with respect to Mount Everest *and* the figure that measuring a weighted rope gives us with respect to a certain tower in each case the "height" of the thing in question? The answer is that we do this because we have found it socially useful to establish a convention to the effect that there is a single quality that is measured by these two very different procedures. Height is therefore a social construct. (It is true that if we used the theodolite to measure the "height" of the tower, it would give the same figure as the weighted rope. But that's not a reflection of some fact about an extra-social reality called height; it's rather a reflection of a certain social fact, namely the procedure we use for calibrating theodolites. If the theodolite did not give the same result as the weighted rope, we would recalibrate the theodolite.) Both mountains and height, therefore, are social constructs, and it follows that "facts" about the height of mountains are social facts. Facts about the height of mountains before there were any people (or facts about what the height of certain mountains would have been if there had never been any people) are no less social facts. They are simply facts about the way in which we apply social constructs retrospectively (or hypothetically). If we wanted, we could adopt quite different conventions about how to apply those constructs in discourse about the distant past.

We could adopt the convention that before, say, 1,000,000 B.C., everything was just one-half the size things were before that date according to our present system of conventions. We don't do this because it would make our geological and evolutionary and astronomical theories harder to state and harder to use. But ease of statement and use is a requirement that we impose on our theories because of our interests. If we were to meet Martians who did adopt such a convention because it satisfied *their* interests—aesthetic interests, perhaps, or interests that we couldn't understand at all—nothing but human chauvinism could lead us to say that they were wrong. Who are we to dictate their interests?

This is, or so I maintain, a fair sample of the way in which anti-Realists argue. (Their argument for the general thesis of anti-Realism would simply be an application of what has been said in this passage about the supposedly mind-independent fact F to all supposedly mind-independent facts.) If this is the extent of the anti-Realists' case, then I do not find it very impressive, for the reason that, in my opinion, it does not establish the mind-dependence of facts like F.

Let us first consider the case of Mount Everest. Let us grant for the sake of argument everything our imaginary anti-Realist has said about the social interests that are served by our drawing the boundaries around the things we call "mountains" the way we do. Let us grant that we might have drawn these boundaries differently if we had had different interests. Still, we *have* drawn these boundaries in a certain way, and—or so it would seem—in drawing them this way we have picked out certain objects as the objects designated by names like 'Mount Everest', 'Pikes Peak', 'the Matterhorn', and so on, and there are certain properties that *these* objects will turn out to have when we get round to examining them. They will turn out to have these properties because they already have them, for these properties belong to these objects independently of the human mind and human conventions and human interests and human social activities. If we had adopted different conventions about where to draw the boundaries of mountains, then 'Mount Everest', which in fact designates the object *x*, an object that is 8,847.7 meters high, would have designated some other object *y*, an object that presumably has some other height. But this is merely a fact about the names things have or might have had, and the height of a thing is not affected by what people call it or by whether they call it anything. No matter how we had chosen to use 'Mount Everest', the objects *x* and *y* would still be there, and *x* would still be 8,847.7 meters high, and the object *y* would still have whatever height it does have.

But doesn't this line of reasoning neglect the contention of the anti-Realists that properties like height, as well as physical objects like mountains, are "social constructs"? The same points apply to this contention. Height is a "social construct" only in the sense that it is a matter of social convention what property (if any) is assigned to the word 'height' as its meaning. (No doubt the fact that a certain property is chosen to be the meaning of some abstract noun like 'height' is best explained by the fact that it answers to some social interest to

have a word whose meaning is that property. The Realist will concede this rather obvious thesis, which is in no way damaging to Realism.)

The social convention that assigns a particular property to the word 'height' is simply a social convention to the effect that the word 'height' is to be used as a name for what is measured by a certain set of procedures. The word 'height' might have been used as a name for what is measured by some different set of procedures. For example, what we call the 'height' of a mountain is measured in meters (or whatever) above sea level. Sea level was chosen as our benchmark because the system of measurement so established satisfies certain of our interests. Other benchmarks could have been used, however. If we had chosen to employ one of these other benchmarks, we might have had not only different *figures* for the heights of various mountains (perhaps 8,773.12 meters instead of 8,847.7 meters for the height of Mount Everest) but different answers to questions of the form 'Is Mount A or Mount B the higher mountain?'

But it does not follow that it is a matter of social convention what the height of Mount Everest is or whether Mount Alfred is higher than Mount Beatrice. All that follows is a fact about English usage: given the actual conventions for using the word 'height' (and related phrases like 'higher than'), the string of English words 'Mount Alfred is higher than Mount Beatrice' expresses a certain thesis *x*; if a certain different convention governed the usage of English speakers, this string of English words would express the distinct thesis *y*. And it is consistent with these facts about the conventions that govern (or might have governed) English usage to suppose that *x* is true and *y* is false, the respective truth and falsity of these two theses being a thing that is not determined by our social conventions, since it depends only on the way in which masses of rock have been molded over the aeons by geological forces—forces that operate in serene indifference to social convention. Here is another way to express what is essentially the same point. Suppose we invent a word to designate the property that 'height' would have designated if we had adopted the other conventional benchmark we have been imagining. Let the word be 'schmeight'. (And we have the related verbal inventions 'schmigh' and 'schmigher than'.) Then all of the following statements may well be simultaneously true (*objectively* true):

- Mount Everest is 8,847.7 meters high.
- Mount Everest is 8,773.12 meters schmigh.
- Mount Alfred is higher than Mount Beatrice.
- Mount Beatrice is schmigher than Mount Alfred.

All that the impressive-sounding thesis that "height is a social construct" really comes to, therefore, is this: if we had adopted a certain different set of conventions for using the words 'height' and 'high', then the first sentence in the above list would mean what the second means, and the third sentence would mean what the fourth means. This harmless thesis—which is, of course, per-

fectly acceptable to the Realist—is not a premise from which anti-Realism can be deduced.

Not only does the "social construct" argument fail to establish any thesis that could reasonably be called anti-Realism, but our application of this argument to the case of the fact F (which certainly looks like a mind-independent fact) fails to provide us with any clue as to what thesis anti-Realism is. What the proponent of the "social construct" argument says about the fact F turns out to be, when it is properly understood, something that is perfectly consistent with Realism. And, therefore, anti-Realism cannot simply be a generalization to all facts of what the proponent of the "social construct" argument is represented above as saying about the fact F.

I am of the opinion that we can do more than simply show that a certain argument for anti-Realism fails to establish that thesis. (That, after all, is a very weak result, for there might be other arguments for anti-Realism.) We can present a very strong argument against anti-Realism. Now one might wonder how I could promise a strong argument against a thesis when, by my own testimony, I not really know what that thesis is. But nothing mysterious is being proposed. I do not fully understand anti-Realism, but I do understand some of the features that anti-Realism is supposed to have. The anti-Realists have ascribed various features to anti-Realism, and many of these features are clearly taken by the anti-Realists to be essential to anti-Realism: any thesis that did not have those features would not be anti-Realism. I shall argue that any thesis that combines these features must be incoherent.

In order to see this, let us consider some brief statement of anti-Realism. It will make no real difference what brief statement we choose or how well we understand it. Let us choose the following statement, which we shall call AR:

Objective truth and falsity do not exist.

Now let us enquire about the status of AR itself—according to AR. AR is a statement about all statements, and it is therefore a statement about itself. What does it say about itself? Well, just what it says about all other statements: that it is neither objectively true nor objectively false. And, of course, it follows from this that it is not objectively true. If it is not objectively true, if it is not true in virtue of corresponding to a reality that is independent of human mental activity, what is it—according to the anti-Realists? What status do they accord to it? No doubt the anti-Realists will say that they accord to it the same status that they accord to statements like '17 + 18 = 35' and 'Lions are carnivorous' and deny to statements like '14 ÷ 12 = 7' and 'Snails are aquatic mammals'. And what status is that? "Well," says the anti-Realist—at least many anti-Realists say something like this—"these statements fit in with our experience, and their denials go against our experience. For example, I have seen lions eating meat, I have never seen any eating vegetables, their teeth are obviously fitted for meat and not for vegetables, all the lion experts say that lions are carnivorous, and so on. You Realists admit that there is such a status as this. It's just the status that leads you to accept or believe certain statements. And you concede that there are statements that have this status and are nevertheless not

what you call 'objectively true', since you concede that a misleading series of experiences could cause someone to accept, say, the statement that lions are herbivorous, which you regard as 'objectively false'. Well, we anti-Realists simply don't see the need for these two additional statuses that you call 'objectively true' and 'objectively false'. We are content with the statuses 'fits in with our experience' and 'goes against our experience'. To answer your question, it is the former of these two statuses that I assign to AR: it fits in with our experience."

But what does the anti-Realist mean by saying, "AR fits in with our experience"? What is this "fitting in"? The way AR fits in with our experience cannot be much like the way 'Lions are carnivorous' fits in with our experience. If one were to reject the latter statement and were to proceed on the assumption that lions were herbivorous, one might get eaten. This fact, and many others like it, provide a fairly robust sense in which the statement that lions are carnivorous "fits in with" our experience and in which its denial "goes against" our experience: if one does not accept this statement, and particularly if one accepts its denial, one may very well get into serious trouble, trouble that one's experiences will make it very clear to one that one is in. The same is true of highly theoretical scientific statements like 'Many of the important properties of water are due to hydrogen bonding' and 'Gravity is a function of the curvature of spacetime', although in the case of such statements, the "trouble" will typically reveal itself only in very special circumstances (just the circumstances that laboratories are designed to produce and astronomical observatories are designed to search out in the heavens). Mathematical statements, too, can be said to fit in with our experience in this sense; if we accept the wrong mathematical statements, our checks will bounce and our bridges will fall down.

But in what sense can a very abstract philosophical statement like AR be said to fit in with our experience? Suppose that Andrew is an anti-Realist and Rachel is a Realist. Are there any possible circumstances in which Rachel will get in trouble because she rejects AR and in which Andrew will avoid trouble because he accepts AR? It is absurd to suppose that Andrew is less likely than Rachel to be eaten by a lion or to propose a scientific theory that is refuted by experiment or to design a bridge that falls down. Andrew may say that he will produce better philosophical theories than Rachel will, but this statement would not seem to be consistent with his account of what is "good" about some statements and "bad" about others—theories are, after all, special kinds of statements—unless the qualities of his theories that make them "better" than Rachel's theories somehow reveal themselves to our experience. And this—making predictions about how our experiences will go—is just what philosophical theories, unlike scientific theories, notoriously do not do.

Or, at any rate, that is what philosophical theories notoriously do not do if by experience we mean sense-experience. Perhaps, however, the anti-Realist is thinking of experience in a broader sense than this. If there were some knockdown argument for AR, that fact might establish the anti-Realist's contention that this statement fits in with our experience, for one sort of experience we have is the experience of examining arguments and finding them compelling. Whether or not this would do the trick, however, it is not some-

thing that we have. There are, as we have observed, no knockdown argument in philosophy. There are no philosophical arguments that all qualified philosophers regard as compelling.

If there were arguments for AR that seemed to the majority of the philosophical community definitely to outweigh all of the known argument against AR, that fact might be enough to establish the anti-Realist's contention that AR fits in with our experience. But, again, whether or not this would be the trick, it is not something we have, for, as matters stand, this is not how things seem to the majority of the philosophical community.

It seems, therefore, that there is no clear sense in which AR can be said "fit in with our experience." Suppose, then, that the anti-Realist were to give up on "us" and retreat to "me"; suppose that the anti-Realist were to say something like "The 'good' feature that I ascribe to statements like 'Lions are carnivorous' and AR and deny to others like 'Snails are aquatic mammals' an 'Objective truth and falsity exist' is just this: fitting in with my experience. Suppose our anti-Realist, Andrew, does say this. What can Rachel the Realist say in reply? Here is one possibility.

A. Objective truth and falsity do not exist.

R. If I understand your theory, when you make that statement you are claiming no more for it than that it fits in with your own experience. Well, you should know. Apparently, when you consider the arguments for AR, you find them convincing: you have that experience. I shouldn't dream of disputing your claim to find those arguments convincing. And you shouldn't dream of disputing my claim to have the experience of finding the arguments against AR compelling. So you can have no objection to my saying, as I do: Objective truth and falsity exist.

A. But that statement goes against my experience.

R. According to your theory, that would be a ground for objecting if you made the statement, "Objective truth and falsity exist." But why should you regard it as a ground for objecting when I make that statement?—unless you think I'm lying when I assure you that when I consider the philosophical arguments against AR I have the experience of finding them compelling. Whatever one may say against Realism, it at least makes disagreement intelligible: according to Realism, when two people disagree about a statement, one of them says it has the "good" feature *objective truth* and the other says that it lacks it. But, according to you, when you say "Objective truth and falsity do not exist" and I say "Objective truth and falsity exist," each of those statements has the only "good" feature whose existence you admit: each of them fits in with the experience of the person who made it. Or did you really mean that there is just one "good" feature that can belong to any statement, no matter who makes it—namely, fitting in with *your* experience? If you do mean

that, I'm afraid that your theory isn't going to win many adherents beyond the one it already has.

Rachel, I believe, has an excellent point. If Andrew can find no "replacement" for truth but "fits in with my own, personal experience," then (assuming that Andrew isn't really proposing that everyone use "fits in with Andrew's experience" as a replacement for truth), he is proposing a theory according to which the philosopher who says "Objective truth and falsity exist" and the philosopher who says "Objective truth and falsity do not exist" are not in disagreement. And this is an absurd consequence. The avenue we have been exploring, therefore, the avenue opened by the suggestion that each individual person has a "private" substitute for truth, has turned out to be a dead end. Let us suppose, therefore, that anti-Realism must postulate a single substitute for truth, one that is the same for everyone.

In that case, however, it seems that anti-Realism is self-refuting: anti-Realism seems to tell us not to accept AR—that is, not to accept anti-Realism. The anti-Realists, if they are to make a convincing case for anti-Realism, must propose a substitute for objective truth; they must specify a feature that "good" statements like 'Lions are carnivorous' have and "bad" statements like 'Snails are aquatic mammals' lack. But they have conspicuously failed to find a substitute for truth that satisfies the following two conditions: (a) all of the uncontroversially "good" statements have it and all of the uncontroversially "bad" statements lack it and (b) anti-Realism has it.

In the preceding discussion, we considered one such substitute for truth: fitting in with our experiences and having a denial that goes against our experiences. Anti-Realists have offered other substitutes for truth than this, but I am convinced that my general criticism holds: it always seems that anti-Realism itself lacks the anti-Realist's proposed substitute for truth. (One famous—or notorious—anti-Realist has proposed the following substitute: a statement is one of the "good" ones if one's peers will let one get away with making it. Most of his peers have greeted this proposal with expressions of outrage or amusement, depending on their temperaments, which would seem to be a pretty clear example of not letting someone get away with something.) Realists face no such problem. Their position is simply that Realism is objectively true and that anti-Realism is objectively false. Whatever other problems Realism may face, it does not say of itself that it should not be accepted.

Our argument against anti-Realism is in some ways similar to the argument that was advanced in Chapter 1 for the conclusion that there is such a thing as ultimate reality, a reality that lies behind all appearances. This is no accident, for one consequence of anti-Realism is that the distinction between appearance and reality is a distinction that can be applied only in certain limited contexts and that, therefore, the notion of an ultimate reality—a reality whose status as reality is independent of context—is incoherent. If there were such a context-independent reality, then there would be such a thing as objective truth: those statements would be objectively true that correctly described the ultimate or context-independent reality. It is therefore misleading to think of anti-Realism as a metaphysic, in the sense in which idealism or lowercase-r

realism is a metaphysic. Anti-Realism, rather, is a denial of the possibility of metaphysics, since the very enterprise of metaphysics is the attempt to discover the nature of ultimate reality. And Realism is a metaphysic only in the sense that it is a thesis that is common to all metaphysical theories.

I propose that, given the very plausible "geological" arguments for Realism, and given the apparently self-refuting nature of anti-Realism, we should be Realists.

Before we leave the topic of Realism and anti-Realism, however, I should like to direct the reader's attention to the greatest of all attacks on anti-Realism, George Orwell's novel *1984*. Anyone who is interested in Realism and anti-Realism should be steeped in the message of this book. The reader is particularly directed to the debate between the Realist Winston Smith and the anti-Realist O'Brien that is the climax of the novel. In the end, there is only one question that can be addressed to the anti-Realist: How does your position differ from O'Brien's?

This completes our promised discussion of three important issues raised by the question whether a statement of the Common Western Metaphysic is a description of appearance or reality. As we remarked earlier, there are many other issues that are raised by this question, issues that have bulked large in the history of metaphysics. Some of these issues will be addressed in later chapters. There is, for example, the issue of what metaphysicians call "persistence through time" or "the identity of an object across time," the problem of whether one and the same object can (as the Common Western Metaphysic alleges) exist at two different times. We shall discuss that problem in connection with our discussion of human beings, since it is human beings whose persistence through time we care most deeply about; because of this concern we have about the persistence of human beings, it will be important to examine the consequences of any theory of persistence for the special case of human beings, and, for that reason, we postpone discussion of persistence till Chapter 10.

Suggestions for Further Reading

It is very hard to find anything about the Realism/anti-Realism debate to recommend to the beginning student of metaphysics. Almost everything that has been written on this topic is either forbiddingly technical or else forbiddingly obscure (or both). With some reservations, I recommend the following four works. The first is rather on the technical side. The remaining three, although they contain many sections that are clear enough, are rather unclear on the matter of exactly what it is that the authors believe. Alston's "Yes, Virginia, There Is a Real World" is a defense of Realism. Putnam's *Reason, Truth and History* (see particularly the first three chapters) and *The Many Faces of Realism* see particularly Lectures I and II) represent the anti-Realist point of view, as does Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

