

Putting metaphysics first: essays on metaphysics and epistemology, by Michael Devitt

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DOI:

[10.1093/mind/fzu165](https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzu165)

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Document Version

Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Suikkanen, J 2015, 'Putting metaphysics first: essays on metaphysics and epistemology, by Michael Devitt', *Mind*, vol. 124, no. 493, pp. 327-331. <https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzu165>

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Putting Metaphysics First: Essays on Metaphysics and Epistemology, by Michael Devitt.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. x + 346. H/b £55.00, P/b £27.50.

Final Author Copy: to be published in *Mind*.

Michael Devitt's recent book Putting Metaphysics First collects together fifteen of his previously published articles on metaphysics and epistemology. I will first explain the basic crux of these articles, then give high praise for the volume, and finally raise a concern about his way of distinguishing antirealist views from realism in a given domain.

The first chapter argues against David Armstrong's realism about universals. It first explains why the One over Many argument is a pseudo-problem. Besides a basic story about how a given predicate 'F' can apply to many F things, no further explanation is needed for why objects a and b are F, and therefore no universals are needed to do explanatory work. Devitt then argues that, if there are any problems for the nominalists in this ballpark, these have to do with the need to provide translations of our talk about the properties of properties to a language that doesn't require the existence of universals.

Chapters 2 to 6 defend scientific and common sense realism. Devitt's realism in these domains has two dimensions: (i) the objects posited by science and common sense exist and (ii) their existence is 'mind-independent'. On this view, electrons, muons, stones and cats exist independently of our concepts, theories, language, judgments and the like. Devitt's main thesis is that we should not approach the questions about the existence of these objects through semantic views about linguistic meaning, reference and truth as it is often done. Rather, following the title of the book, we should put metaphysics first. The main argument for this thesis is that semantic views (for instance, about the nature of truth) are compatible with a variety of metaphysical views (and vice-versa), and furthermore through science we know much more about the existence and nature of entities directly than we know about the word to world relations investigated in semantics.

These chapters then correct mistakes often made in the realism debates (ch. 2); argue that there are no sound arguments from the sceptical worries about how our theories are underdetermined by evidence to antirealism in metaphysics (ch. 3); defend an argument for scientific realism based on the success of scientific methodology and oppose pessimistic meta-inductions in science (ch. 4); criticise the popular combination of scientific constructivism and theory incommensurability often motivated by descriptivist views about reference (ch. 5); and challenge global response dependence views on the basis that they lead to bizarre forms of worldmaking (ch. 6).

Chapter 7 considers how sophisticated antirealist, nonfactualist views can be distinguished from realist views in different domains even if both views accept the same claims about what there is. According to Devitt, the key to solving this problem is that realists will always make at least some claims about the nature and causal role of the relevant entities which the nonfactualists cannot accept. Chapter 8 applies this view to the debates about truth. Devitt claims that deflationism should be understood both as a semantic view about the truth term and as a metaphysical rejection of the explanatory claims which correspondence theorists make about the nature and causal role of the truth property. Similarly, chapter 9 defends naturalist moral realism in metaethics. On this view, some things are objectively right and wrong, and furthermore we can both give informative non-reductive accounts of the nature of the moral reality and rely on this reality in good scientific explanations given suitable background assumptions.

In the two chapters on philosophy of biology (10 and 11), Devitt insists that we must first distinguish between questions on two levels. First, we can ask in virtue of what properties is a given organism a member of a species F (the taxa problem). Second, we can ask a higher-order question in virtue of what are Fs a species for example rather than a subspecies or a genus (the category problem). Devitt opposes the mainstream views in this

domain by arguing that an organism belongs to a species in virtue of its intrinsic underlying properties, namely genetic ones. He then answers the separate higher-order question by claiming that at least some historically motivated species taxonomies are different in that they can play a useful explanatory role in biological evolutionary sciences, whereas other types of species taxonomies and also higher categories are not natural kinds in the same sense.

Chapters 12 and 13 defend naturalism in epistemology. This is the thesis that there is only one empirical way of knowing and as a result there is no such a thing as a priori knowledge. Devitt offers two arguments for this thesis: the holistic nature of confirmation à la Quine and the general obscurity of the a priori. Devitt's main contribution in these chapters is the careful critical examination of the best attempts to defend a priori knowledge in logic, mathematics and semantics. The main crux is that such attempts always fail to justify on non-empirical grounds what is said to be known, whereas the naturalist and holistic framework at least promises to help us to find empirical justification for that knowledge.

Finally, in chapter 14, Devitt argues that philosophical intuitions should be understood as 'empirical theory-laden central-processor responses to phenomena differing from many other such judgments only in being immediate' (p. 294). Such responses do not have any privileged status as often assumed, but they can still play a useful role in helping us to recognise certain important kinds of which we have expertise through acquaintance or because we produce the relevant data. However, when we have identified a kind, intuitions can tell us less about the nature of that kind. At that second stage, we better rely on science. The last chapter applies this understanding of intuitions and their role to the study of the reference-relations. Our intuitions can help us to identify these relations but the question of their nature and scientific usefulness are better left for the empirically-minded linguists and semanticists. This is because there is no reason to assume that the true theory of reference is stored in our minds. Devitt's aim in this chapter is also to argue that theories of reference

cannot be used to determine what there isn't in the way that eliminativists in various domains have often done when they have relied on descriptivist views of reference.

Now for the high praise. Through these articles, Devitt has consistently done more than perhaps anyone else to clarify what is at issue generally in the realism debates and to provide strongest possible defences of realism in a number of different domains. Both realists and antirealists owe him a lot for this important contribution. Devitt's writing also always moves heavyweight intellectual objects in a way that is always clear, accessible and devoid of any unnecessary jargon or technicalities. I hope that, like his realist views, his style too will continue to influence young philosophers.

Finally, here is my concern. In the more recent articles, Devitt recognises that antirealists will in the end accept the same claims about what exists and what is mind-independent (p. 140). The expressivists in metaethics, for example, accept that torturing people is objectively wrong and that this doesn't depend on what people think about torture. Devitt's response to this challenge is to claim that there will always be some obviously factual claims about the nature of wrongness and its causal role, which the anti-realist will not be able to accept. She can't say that Alice is good in virtue of behaving in a certain way or that millions died because Hitler was depraved (p. 187).

This seems mistaken. Here's Simon Blackburn: 'Cruelty is bad ... because it exhibits the intention to cause pain' (Ruling Passions, Oxford: OUP, 1998, pp. 307–308). What about the causal explanation based on Hitler's depravity? The truth of that explanation requires only that, if Hitler had not been depraved, then millions would not have died. Blackburn explicitly accepts such causal explanations (ibid, pp. 315–317). Given the supervenience of the moral on the non-moral which expressivists endorse, Hitler could have been not-depraved only if he had been very different in all sorts of other ways. Had he been that way, millions might have not died. Thus expressivists accept all the same claims about the nature of moral

properties as the realists and they also endorse the same causal explanations. They just interpret these claims in a different way in their own metasemantic framework. This means that Devitt's hopes for finding an uncontroversially factual area of language in which (i) realist accepts some claims and (ii) the antirealist has to deny these claims are therefore dashed.

How could we then distinguish antirealism from realism? I believe that the title of Devitt's brilliant book offers us at least one way of doing this. Before Devitt, antirealists argued that both antirealists and realists should formulate and defend their views as semantic theses about meaning and truth. Devitt convincingly argues here that we should not let antirealists to define the terms of the debate. He claims that both realists and antirealists should formulate and defend their views instead as metaphysical views about the nature of the entities in the relevant domain. My suggestion is that perhaps we should understand the difference between realists and antirealists in terms of this disagreement: as a difference in the order of explanation. This is to say that realists are right in saying that in the realist domains we know enough about the nature of the relevant entities and for this reason it makes sense to put metaphysics first in those domains. Here we can rely on the relevant entities in our theorising about mental content and reference and in the story we tell about the mechanism by which we know about those entities.

However, contra Devitt, it doesn't seem like the antirealists should put metaphysics first in the domains in which they want to defend antirealism. It is an open possibility for antirealists to argue that in some domains, like in ethics or logic, we know more about the semantics of the given discourse as a result of grasping the practical, expressive and inferential roles of the relevant terminology. In this situation, it makes sense for the antirealists to begin in these domains from semantics and use the understanding of the relevant language to say the little that needs to be said in metaphysics. This proposal makes

the realism debates in the different domains themselves to be about what the correct order of explanation in the domain is: should we start from metaphysics or semantics here? This seems correct to me, but we could not have ended here without Devitt's insightful formulation and defence of realism.

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