

Handout #16

Alston, "Yes Virginia, There is a Real World"

What is realism? Alston considers a couple of possible definitions.. The first is:

"Whatever there is, is what it is regardless of how we think of it." Also, "there is something independent of human thought " (620).

But isn't the first part just obviously false? It ignores the phenomenon of self-fulfilling expectations, such as students failing because their teachers expect them to. (Other examples?) How would we attempt to fix the definition?

Anyway Alston for quite different reasons ("Realism so stated is a bit hard to get hold of") prefers a second definition: "Our statements are issued with a (realistic) truth claim (a claim to truth in the realist sense)" (620), where, "a distinguishing feature of the realistic sense of 'true' is that it is logically possible for even the best attested statement to be false" (620).

He calls this a consequence of the first definition. (Is it?) Realism in this sense is "modest" because compatible with any view about the nature of reality, e.g., Berkeleyan idealism. What it isn't compatible with are theories that deny that our assertions aim at the TRUTH, where TRUTH is the above-mentioned realistic sense of 'true.' His main example is the pragmatist theory of truth, due to Charles Pierce and William James and advocated in our own time by Richard Rorty. Rorty calls truth an "automatic compliment we pay" to things we find it useful to say, or will let others get away with saying. It is a kind of idealized assertability. Alston raises a series of objections to anti-realist theories like Rorty's.

(A1) Anti-realists think that asserting that S = asserting that 'S' would be included in the ultimate scientific theory.

(A2) Either real truth reappears at the second level - it is realistically true that 'S' would be included - or we get an infinite regress.

(A3) Either way anti-realism fails.

BUT: (A1) is mistaken. Suppose with the anti-realist that truth = inclusion in the ultimate theory. Then asserting that 'S' belongs to the ultimate theory = asserting that '*S' is true*', not asserting that S. Asserting that S is just that -- the ultimate theory has nothing to do with it. This eliminates any appearance of regress.

(B1) "You can't in one and the same breath construe the statement as a commitment to X's being j and also deny that the statement is true iff X is j." (627)

(B2) "To understand the statement content in this familiar way is to subject it to realistic truth conditions." (627)

(B3) You can't give the statement its ordinary reading without subjecting it to realistic truth conditions..

BUT: Why should the anti-realist deny that 'X is j' is true iff X is j?

Both sides are true under the same condition, viz. membership in the ideal theory.

Assuming the ideal theory contains both sides (or neither), the biconditional is true.

(C1) Given (B3), "the anti-realist will have to come up with some other way of specifying what is being asserted - other than "The speaker referred to snow and said of it that it is white." (627)

(C2) The content can't be that 'S' belongs to the ideal theory because "this radically distorts our intent" (628)

(C3) We must "take S to be, not the statement that S satisfies certain epistemic conditions, but rather the statement of those conditions themselves," that is, verification or assertability conditions (628),

(C4) But "We cannot judge a certain condition to be providing some evidence for S....except against the background of a conception of what would render S true" (628)

BUT: Why not? Are you saying that "that's malleable" wasn't evidence for "that's gold" until we figured out that gold had such and such an atomic structure? Second, once we do figure it out, the anti-realist too can claim to have an independent conception of what would render S true, viz. its atomic structure.

The point of all this is that the anti-realist does not deny the realist's platitudes, so much as subject them to further interpretation. Consider an analogy from Alston himself: one can say in the same breath that (a) Holmes smoked a pipe and (b) what it is for that to be true is that according to the stories, he smoked a pipe. Likewise one can say in the same breath that (a') gold is an element, and (b') what it is for that to be true is that gold is an element according to our best views on these matters.