REALISM

Authored by
mohammad looti

October 15, 2025

REALISM

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy, Aesthetics, Political Science, Literature

1. Core Definition

Realism is a foundational doctrine that asserts the existence of an external reality independent of human perception, knowledge, or linguistic frameworks. Philosophically, this position holds that objects and phenomena possess an ontological existence that remains valid and structured even in the complete absence of an observer. This essential commitment to the mind-independence of the world distinguishes **Realism** from various forms of anti-realism, such as subjective idealism, which posits that reality is constituted by consciousness, or constructivism, which argues that reality is largely manufactured through social agreement or language. Consequently, the core thesis of philosophical **Realism** is both an ontological claim (about what exists) and an epistemological claim (about the possibility of knowing that external existence).

Beyond metaphysics, the term **Realism** also describes a specific movement within the arts and literature, where it functions as a mode of representation. In this context, **Realism** dictates an attempt to show human experience or society with uncompromising fidelity to true life, aiming for accuracy, objectivity, and a focus on the mundane or unromanticized aspects of existence. Furthermore, **Realism** is a central, pragmatic theoretical paradigm in International Relations, focusing on the objective constraints and necessities imposed by the anarchic structure of the global system. Across these fields, the common thread is the dedication to recognizing and engaging with an objective, external structure--whether it be physical reality, societal truth, or state power dynamics--on its own terms, rather than subjecting it to subjective interpretation or idealization.

2. Historical Roots and the Problem of Universals

The earliest iteration of **Realism**, often referred to as Metaphysical Realism or Platonic Realism, stems from the ancient Greek philosophical tradition, particularly the work of Plato. This older doctrine addressed the problem of universals, the question of the ontological status of general concepts, abstract ideas, or properties (such as 'beauty' or 'triangularity'). Platonic Realism states that these universals possess a genuine reality that is greater, more perfect, and more enduring than the physical, particular examples to which they refer. These Forms or Ideas exist eternally and immutably in a transcendent realm, providing the true structure and essence that underlies the changing, sensible physical world we inhabit.

This debate concerning universals continued through the medieval period, framing the famous conflict between Realism, Nominalism, and Conceptualism. Medieval Realists, following Plato and

thinkers like Anselm of Canterbury, argued that universals exist *ante rem* (before things), independent of human minds and particular instances. This view provided a theological foundation for abstract concepts and divine order. The challenge posed by Nominalism, which asserted that universals are mere names or labels assigned by humans, forced Realism to evolve, laying the groundwork for later empirical realisms that focused more acutely on the independent existence of material objects rather than purely abstract entities. The modern philosophical defense of **Realism** largely emerged as a rebuttal to subjective idealism and skepticism, emphasizing the common-sense certainty of the external physical world.

3. Key Varieties of Philosophical Realism

Philosophical **Realism** branches into several distinct schools depending on the nature of what is claimed to be real and how that reality is accessed by the observer. The most straightforward is **Direct Realism**, sometimes called Naive Realism, which asserts that the sensory experience provides immediate and unmediated access to objects as they truly are in the external world. Under this view, the properties we perceive (color, texture, sound) belong intrinsically to the object itself, independent of the observer's cognitive apparatus. This perspective aligns closely with everyday human intuition but struggles to account for perceptual discrepancies, illusions, or hallucinations.

In contrast, **Indirect Realism** (or Representational Realism) accepts the existence of a mind-independent world but argues that perception is mediated. We do not perceive objects directly; rather, we perceive mental representations or sensory data that are caused by the external objects. While the external world is acknowledged as real, our access to it is limited by the representational screen of our senses and mind, leading to debates about the fidelity of these representations. A third crucial form is **Scientific Realism**, which focuses specifically on the products of scientific inquiry, arguing that the theoretical entities posited by successful scientific theories--such as genes, quarks, or gravitational fields--actually exist in the world, and that scientific theories offer a truthful or approximately truthful depiction of underlying, unobservable reality.

4. Realism in Literature and Aesthetics

The literary and artistic movement of **Realism** developed in Europe during the mid-19th century as a direct rejection of Romanticism's emphasis on emotion, subjectivity, and the sublime. Literary **Realism** sought to replace sentimentality and heroic idealism with an objective, detailed, and often clinical depiction of everyday life. This movement prioritized verisimilitude--the appearance of truth--by employing meticulous description, complex psychological characterization, and dialogue that accurately reflected the speech patterns of the time. Realist narratives typically focused on the experiences of the middle and lower classes, often addressing contemporary social problems,

economic struggles, and the moral ambiguities of industrialized society, thereby bringing subjects previously considered unworthy of high art into serious consideration.

The goal of artistic **Realism** was to create an illusion of reality so compelling that the reader or viewer felt they were experiencing true life unmediated by the author's bias. Figures like Gustave Flaubert (known for *Madame Bovary*) and Honoré de Balzac exemplified this attempt to capture society's structure and detail with sociological precision. Similarly, in visual arts, painters like Gustave Courbet rejected historical and mythological themes, focusing instead on depicting ordinary workers and landscapes without idealization, thereby asserting that the commonplace was a legitimate subject for profound artistic expression. This insistence on representing society in such a way that its gritty, complex, and unidealized true life is shown remains the hallmark of aesthetic **Realism**.

5. Realism in International Relations Theory

Within political science, **Realism** is one of the most enduring and influential theoretical traditions in International Relations (IR). This paradigm is characterized by a commitment to the objective assessment of power dynamics, focusing on states as the primary actors in a global system defined by **anarchy** (the absence of a world government). IR Realists, tracing their lineage through thinkers like Thucydides and modern proponents like Hans Morgenthau (Classical Realism) and Kenneth Waltz (Neorealism), argue that because states exist in a self-help environment, the pursuit of security and self-interest invariably leads to competition and conflict.

Classical Realism attributes state behavior to the unchanging, competitive nature of human beings, defined by an inherent drive for power. Neorealism, or Structural Realism, shifts the focus, arguing that state behavior is determined primarily by the external structure of the international system (e.g., the distribution of power among great states). In both forms, **Realism** emphasizes the critical importance of military capabilities, the balance of power, and the inevitability of the security dilemma, wherein actions taken by one state to increase its security are interpreted as threats by others, leading to an arms race. This approach is fundamentally pragmatic, prioritizing survival and national interest above ideological or moral considerations in foreign policy.

6. The Doctrine of Scientific Realism

Scientific Realism is a specific philosophical stance regarding the status of scientific theories. It makes two fundamental claims: first, that scientific theories aim to give a literally true account of the world; and second, that successful scientific theories often succeed in achieving this aim, meaning their central terms refer to actually existing entities in the world. The primary justification for this view is the celebrated "no miracles argument," which posits that the immense empirical success, predictive accuracy, and technological efficacy of modern science would be inexplicable--

a sheer miracle--if the theories driving this success were merely convenient fictions or instruments for prediction rather than true descriptions of reality.

Therefore, a Scientific Realist maintains faith that when a theory posits the existence of unobservable entities (like gravitational waves or tectonic plates), these entities are genuinely real components of the universe, and scientific progress is the gradual convergence upon a more accurate, objective description of reality. This view is essential for underwriting the epistemological value of scientific inquiry, asserting that science truly discovers facts about a mind-independent world. This contrasts sharply with Instrumentalism, which views scientific theories simply as useful tools for prediction and control, without necessarily committing to the literal truth or existence of their theoretical components.

7. Debates and Criticisms

Realism, in its various forms, faces substantial philosophical opposition. The primary critique against metaphysical and scientific realism is mounted by anti-realists, who emphasize the theory-laden nature of observation and the cognitive constraints on human knowledge. Critics often utilize the pessimistic meta-induction argument, noting that the history of science is littered with empirically successful theories (e.g., the belief in phlogiston) that were later rejected as fundamentally false, suggesting that current successful theories are equally likely to be overturned, thereby undermining confidence in the idea of converging on objective truth.

In the arts, literary **Realism** is criticized for its inherent impossibility of achieving true objectivity, as any act of representation necessarily involves selection, interpretation, and subjective framing by the author. Furthermore, the focus on the strictly empirical and ordinary is often accused of neglecting profound psychological, symbolic, or spiritual dimensions of human experience. Finally, IR **Realism** is widely challenged by Liberalism and Constructivism for its inherent pessimism and reductionism. Critics argue that Realism fails to account for increasing global cooperation, the development of international institutions, the impact of non-state actors, and the profound role that shared ideas, norms, and identity play in shaping state behavior beyond mere power calculations.

Further Reading

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Realism
Wikipedia: Realism (philosophy)
Wikipedia: Realism (international relations)
Wikipedia: Realism (arts)