Metaphysical Anti-Realism*

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Abstract

Metaphysical anti-realism is a large and heterogeneous group of views that do not share a common thesis but only share a certain family resemblance. Views as different as mathematical nominalism—the view that numbers do not exist—, ontological relativism—the view that what exists depends on a perspective—, and modal conventionalism—the view that modal facts are conventional—all are versions of metaphysical anti-realism. As the latter two examples suggest, relativist ideas play a starring role in many versions of metaphysical anti-realism. But what does it mean for the existence of something to “depend on” a perspective, or for a modal fact to “depend on” a convention? We can distinguish between various dependence relations, giving rise to an array of drastically different forms of metaphysical anti-realism. This article offers a guided tour. I develop a systematic distinction between various forms of metaphysical anti-realism with a focus on the role of relativist ideas in this landscape.

1 Introduction

Metaphysical anti-realism is a large and heterogeneous cluster of views that do not share a common thesis but only share a certain family resemblance. Views as different as mathematical nominalism¹—the view that numbers do not exist—, ontological relativism²—the

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²See Field (1980) for a defense of mathematical nominalism.

²See Quine (1968), Davidson (1973/74) and Sosa (1999) for discussions.
view that what exists depends on (something like) a perspective—, and modal conventionalism—, the view that modal facts are conventional—all are versions of metaphysical anti-realism. As the latter two examples suggest, relativist ideas play a starring role in many versions of metaphysical anti-realism. But what does it mean for the existence of something to “depend on” a perspective, or for a modal fact to “depend on” a convention? We can distinguish between various dependence relations, giving rise to an array of drastically different forms of metaphysical anti-realism. This article offers a guided tour. I develop a systematic distinction between various forms of metaphysical anti-realism with a focus on the role of relativist ideas in this landscape.

I pursue two goals through this discussion. The first goal is to provide a recipe book. Suppose you are inclined towards an anti-realist view with regard to numbers. Which views are available to you? This article distinguishes between a few options. I will not be able to discuss all the options; but I will make a start. The second goal is to increase intelligibility. Sometimes anti-realist views are phrased in esoteric-sounding terms, as when Sosa (1999, p. 133) says that “In order for [a constituted] sort of entity to exist relative to a conceptual scheme, that conceptual scheme must recognize its constituent form as an appropriate way for a distinctive sort of entity to be constituted.” What is a conceptual scheme, and how can it recognize anything? I won’t answer these questions; but I aim to show that a few versions of metaphysical anti-realism are intelligible and coherent.

My discussion will proceed as follows. In §2, I discuss the difference between metaphysical realism and anti-realism. In §3, I discuss the most straightforward versions of metaphysical anti-realism: views according to which certain entities do not exist. In §4, I discuss versions of metaphysical anti-realism that bring in relativist ideas. This includes views according to which certain entities—even though they exist—are not real,

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3See Sidelle (1989) for a defense of modal conventionalism.
4Davidson (1973/74, p. 5) discusses these questions and argues that “Conceptual relativism is a heady and exotic doctrine, or would be if we could make good sense of it. The trouble is, as so often in philosophy, it is hard to improve intelligibility while retaining excitement.”
and views according to which certain facts—even though they exist—are not absolute. In §5, I conclude with a brief summary.

2 Realism vs. Anti-Realism

The question of how to define metaphysical anti-realism is a thorny question, but I think to a large extend terminological. ‘Realism’ is a technical term. Various philosophers have and legitimately can define what they mean by this term differently. To be useful, a definition should not be entirely arbitrary, however, but relate to established uses of the term in meaningful ways, and make these established uses explicit, clearer, and more precise.\(^5\)

I will here assume the following working definition:

**Metaphysical Anti-Realism** is a cluster of views according to which entities of some kind \(X\) do not exist, or if they exist, are not real or (in the case of facts) absolute.

This definition does not define metaphysical anti-realism by a single thesis but by a schema. The schema is ‘\(X\)s do not exist or, if \(X\)s exist, they are not real or (in the case of facts) absolute’. We can obtain versions of metaphysical anti-realism by replacing the letter ‘\(X\)’ in this schema with the name of a kind of entities, in a way that observes certain side constraints. In particular, ‘\(X\)’ must be the name of a kind of entity whose metaphysical status is under debate in metaphysics. For example, nominalists assert that *numbers do not exist*, and modal conventionalists assert that *modal facts are not absolute* (since they depend on conventions). Or at least this is one way of developing the view.

The side constraint, according to which instances of the schema can only be derived by replacing ‘\(X\)’ with the name of a kind of entity whose metaphysical status is under debate in metaphysics, is vague; but it helps to distinguish metaphysical anti-realism

\(^5\)Using Carnap’s (1950, p. 3) terminology, we can also say that a useful definition of ‘metaphysical anti-realism’ should provide an *explication* of the vague and imprecise notion that is already in use.
from other forms of anti-realism. Metaphysical anti-realism is distinguished by its domain. Other forms of anti-realism include moral anti-realism—the view that moral facts are not absolute—, and aesthetic anti-realism—the view that aesthetic facts are not absolute. These other forms of anti-realism also have a metaphysical core, and the distinction between the different versions of anti-realism may not always be clean-cut. An alternative approach would drop the side-constraint and treat metaphysical anti-realism as the most general form of anti-realism. But that’s not the approach I pursue here.

We can distinguish between various versions of metaphysical anti-realism. For one, versions of metaphysical anti-realism differ with regard to the sort of entities which they concern. Some anti-realist views primarily concern objects; e.g., they may concern the metaphysical status of numbers, of universals, or of composite objects (that have parts), and so on. Other anti-realist views primarily concern facts; e.g., on certain anti-realist views, there is no absolute fact with regard to the existence of numbers. These two approaches—objectual and fact-oriented—are crucially different.⁶ For example, arguing that there is no fact of the matter with regard to the existence of numbers appears inconsistent with arguing that numbers do not exist. Furthermore, versions of metaphysical anti-realism also differ in what they say about the metaphysical status of the entities that they concern. For example, some anti-realisists simply deny that Fs exist; other anti-realisists allow that Fs exist, but deny that Fs are real (see Fine, 2009). Similarly for anti-realist views about facts. Some anti-realisists simply deny the existence of certain facts; others allow that the relevant facts hold, but argue (moreover) that they are not absolute.

Given that metaphysical anti-realism is such a broad class of views, most people are anti-realists about some entity or another. For example, most people think that witches and ghosts do not exist; they are anti-realists about witches and ghosts. Saying that someone is a metaphysical anti-realist without qualification therefore is nearly without content.

⁶A third anti-realist approach is property-oriented. On this approach, certain properties are not genuine constituents of reality. See Spencer (2016) for a relevant discussion of the different ways in which an object can have a property only “relative to” something else.
Metaphysical anti-realism is not the same as metaphysical deflationism. Metaphysical deflationists, such as Hirsch (2011) and Thomasson (2015) think that metaphysical inquiry is pointless or misguided. For example, Thomasson (2015) argues that ontological questions can be answered “easily” and do not require deep, metaphysical inquiry. Deflationist views are often called “anti-realist”, perhaps because deflationists in a sense are “against” metaphysics, and therefore “anti”-metaphysical. But metaphysical anti-realists propose metaphysical views. For example, the thesis that numbers do not exist is a metaphysical thesis about the fundamental structure of reality. There is at least a tension between defending a metaphysical view and arguing that metaphysical inquiry is pointless. It is therefore important to clearly distinguish deflationism from anti-realism.

Why this definition of metaphysical anti-realism, and not another? The literature contains a range of alternative definitions of ‘metaphysical anti-realism’. Some philosophers think that metaphysical anti-realism equates to idealism (Smith, 1999; Khlentzos, 2016). Other philosophers embrace a disjunctive definition, according to which metaphysical anti-realists either deny that certain entities (Fs, say) exist or else argue that Fs exist mind-dependently (Miller, 2016). Yet other philosophers suggest that, according to anti-realists, certain entities exist but are not “real” (Fine, 2009). A fourth approach construes metaphysical anti-realism.


\footnotetext[7]{For example, Biggs and Wilson (2016) argue that, according to Carnap (1956 [1950]), metaphysical claims are meaningless, and they call this view “metaphysical anti-realism”.}

\footnotetext[8]{Hirsch (2011) combines a deflationary view with the defense of a specific metaphysical viewpoint. To some people, this combination of views has appeared inconsistent. For example, Sider (2011) argues that Hirsch’s view called “quantifier variance” is “just more metaphysics”.}

\footnotetext[9]{Is Hirsch’s (2011) “quantifier variance” view a form of metaphysical anti-realism? Many people think it is, perhaps because of Hirsch’s opposition to Sider’s (2009; 2011) realism about ontology. Hirsch (2009, p. 231) denies, however, that his view is a form of anti-realism: “my position is robustly realist. I take it for granted that the world and the things in it exist for the most part in complete independence of our knowledge or language. Our linguistic choices do not determine what exists, but determine what we are to mean by the words ‘what exists’ and related words”. I think that there is a specific sense in which quantifier variance is an anti-realist view. Hirsch denies that there is a metaphysically distinguished quantificational structure. He is at least an anti-realist about this sort of structure.}
physical anti-realism as a semantic thesis which rejects a certain correspondence theory of truth (see Dummett, 1982; Millikan, 1986).\(^{10}\)

I prefer my definition over these alternatives because it groups views together that have important commonalities, and distinguishes these views from others that are importantly different. The first two alternatives above make a strong connection between anti-realism and idealism; but that choice seems arbitrary. Some idealists simply propose a view about the nature of the physical universe—it is fundamentally mental. This view does not appear anti-realist in any way.\(^{11}\) The third and fourth alternatives above are not sufficiently general. They describe different ways of developing a version of metaphysical anti-realism, but do not offer a general definition of metaphysical anti-realism. In short, the four alternative definitions of metaphysical anti-realism are either too broad or too narrow, which provides motivation for my approach.

3 Anti-Realist Views that Deny the Existence of Certain Entities

The most straightforward versions of metaphysical anti-realism are views that deny the existence of objects of some sort \(F\). Views in this group include nominalism about \textit{universals}—the view that universals do not exist—and nominalist views about \textit{abstract entities—}\(10\)

\(^{10}\)I am simplifying things in this paragraph. Smith (1999); Khlentzos (2016) speak about \textit{metaphysical anti-realism}, Miller (2016) discusses anti-realism in general, and Fine (2009) discusses ontological anti-realism. I think it is fair to interpret all these authors as embracing specific accounts of metaphysical anti-realism, since metaphysical anti-realism is a specific version of anti-realism, and ontological anti-realism is a specific version of metaphysical anti-realism.

\(^{11}\)My view is that some but not all forms of idealism are forms of metaphysical anti-realism; and some but not all anti-realists are idealists. I will not discuss idealism in any detail, however, since other authors have discussed the topic in much detail recently. For example, Hofweber (forthcoming) draws an important distinction between “ontological” and “alethic” idealism, and provides a novel defense of alethic idealism. Ontological idealists think that physical objects are mind-dependent; alethic idealists think that the existence of certain facts is a mind-dependent matter. Furthermore, see Chalmers (forthcoming) for a discussion of the distinction between realist and anti-realist versions of idealism.
The opponents of nominalism about universals are realists about universals, and the opponents of nominalism about abstract objects are platonists. Two main kinds of argument support nominalism. First, epistemological arguments. Abstract objects are causally inert, which combined with basic empiricist assumptions may make it seem doubtful that we can have knowledge about them, or know that they exist. Second, indispensability arguments. For example, Field (1980) argues that numbers are dispensable for the purposes of science. Since they are dispensable, we have no reason to think they exist.

Nominalists deny the existence of certain objects. We can distinguish between different versions of metaphysical anti-realism with regard to the kind of entities that they concern. Other metaphysical anti-realists deny the existence of certain relations, certain kinds, or certain facts, and so on. For example, Wilson (2014) argues that there is no capital-G grounding relation, and Glasgow (2009) denies that race is a biological kind. These views are versions of anti-realism about the capital-G grounding relation and about race as a biological kind, respectively. Furthermore, we can develop views on which facts of a certain sort do not exist in at least two different ways.

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12 To give a few more radical examples, Dasgupta (2009) and Azzouni (2017) both argue that, fundamentally, no objects exist at all. On Dasgupta’s (2009) view, the fundamental facts are qualitative and do not concern particular individuals. On Azzouni’s (2017) view, fundamentally only “features” but no objects exist.

13 See Rodriguez-Pereyra (2015) for a useful overview and references.

14 Empiricist concerns play a role in Quine’s arguments for nominalism. See Goodman and Quine (1947) and Quine (1953 [1948]).

15 Wilson (2014) thinks that there are various metaphysical dependence relations, such as type or token identity, functional realization, classical mereological parthood, the set membership relation, the proper subset relation, the determinable/determinate relation, and so on, but not a unique in-virtue-of relation that could do all the explanatory work which metaphysicists often want the Grounding relation to do.

16 Wilson (2014) also supports her view by means of indispensability arguments. She argues that a capital-G grounding relation is not needed to explain anything, and concludes that we should not believe in its existence.
First, according to some meta-ethical expressivists, normative sentences do not express propositions but express non-cognitive mental states. Here is Ayer (1971 [1936], p. 110) giving voice to this view:

“if I say to someone, ‘You acted wrongly in stealing that money’, I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, ‘You stole that money’. In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it.”

Ayer here effectively says that an utterance of ‘stealing is wrong’ expresses moral disapproval and does not express a proposition. On this view, normative facts do not exist.\(^{17}\) It is hard to see, however, how one might develop an analogous expressivist view about a metaphysical domain. A possible view is that “numbers exist” does not express a proposition but instead expresses approval of numbers; but this view has little going for it.\(^{18}\)

Second, another way for arguing that facts of a certain sort do not exist is by rejecting the principle of bivalence—according to which every proposition is either true or false (but never both)—for a certain area of discourse. Dummett (1982) pursues this approach to anti-realism, and argues that the rejection of bivalence for a particular area of discourse is sufficient for being an anti-realist about that area.\(^{19}\) For example, one way of being an anti-realist about the past is by rejecting bivalence for statements about the past (see

\(^{17}\)There are many different versions of meta-ethical expressivism; see Schroeder (2009) for a discussion. On some views, such as Gibbard’s (2003) norm-expressivism, normative sentences do express semantic contents that are very much like propositions but which are true or false only relative to a nonstandard “hyperplan” parameter that represents a norm.

\(^{18}\)Flocke (forthcoming) develops an expressivist view about ontology. But on Flocke’s view, the semantic values of quantified sentences are propositions. The main difference to a realist view is that these propositions are non-objective.

\(^{19}\)Fine (2001, p. 6) argues against Dummett that a rejection of bivalence is not sufficient for being an anti-realist. For more detailed discussions of Dummett’s conception of the realism–anti-realism divide, see Edgington (1980-81) and Millikan (1986).
Dummett, 1968–1969); and one way of being an anti-realist about numbers is by rejecting bivalence for mathematical statements (see Dummett, 1977).

Dummett argues, however, that even though a rejection of bivalence is sufficient for anti-realism, it is not necessary. Realists about a certain area of discourse, according to Dummett’s conception, endorse a thesis with two components. As Dummett puts it:

“To have a realistic conception, it is not enough to suppose that statements of the given class are determined, by the reality to which they relate, either as true or as false; one has also to have a certain conception of the manner which they are so determined. This conception consists essentially in the classical two-valued semantics: and this, in turn, embodies an appeal to the notion of reference as an indispensable notion of the semantic theory”. (Dummett, 1982, pp. 56-57)

On this view, a realist about mathematical statements thinks that mathematical sentences in some way relate to mathematical reality, are either true or false in virtue of how they relate to mathematical reality, where (moreover) reference to mathematical entities plays an important role for determining the truth-value of mathematical sentences. This account yields that there are two main ways of being an anti-realist about mathematics: either by denying the principle of bivalence for mathematical sentences, as intuitionists do, or by denying that mathematical objects (such as numbers) as the referents of mathematical sentences make mathematical sentences true (when they are true).\footnote{Rayo’s (2017) view illustrates the latter form of anti-realism. Rayo (2017) develops a domain-free semantics, that does not make essential use of assignment functions of the kind that in regular semantics interpret singular terms and variables. On Rayo’s approach, universally quantified sentences are interpreted as conjunctions, and existentially quantified sentences are interpreted as disjunctions. Furthermore, atomic sentences are assigned propositions as semantic values directly, without supposing that this assignment is based on a prior assignment of referents to singular terms and extensions to predicates. Rayo’s (2017) view counts as anti-realist on Dummett’s (1982) conception, since he does not think that reference to objects plays a role}
anti-realism is quite close to a more “objectual” version of anti-realism that simply denies
the existence of certain objects (i.e., numbers).

4 The Role of Relativist Ideas

Proponents of metaphysical anti-realism appeal to relativist ideas in various ways and for
a variety of reasons. I will discuss a few examples, first focusing on anti-realist views that
concern objects and then focusing on anti-realist views that concern facts.

I will discuss two examples of versions of metaphysical anti-realism that concern ob-
jects and appeal to relativist ideas. First an example from social metaphysics. Anti-realists
about race have reasons to acknowledge the existence of racial groups. Some of these rea-
sons are political: a fight against racism makes sense only if race-based discrimination
persists, which in turn presupposes the existence of racial groups. But how can an anti-
realist about race acknowledge the existence of races?

Glasgow (2009) responds to this challenge by arguing that race is not a biological kind
but socially constructed. On his view, races understood as biological kinds do not exist,
which makes Glasgow an anti-realist about race as a biological kind. But Glasgow never-
theless thinks that races exist and are real; they are just socially constructed. In Glasgow’s
(2009, p. 5) words: “just as journalists or doctors are real but socially constructed kinds
of people, so racial kinds of people are real but socially constructed. Racial groups are
real groups that have been created by our social practices, rather than by some biological
process.”21 Glasgow here appeals to social construction as a metaphysical dependence
relation in order to explain the nature of races. The upshot is that, since races are not

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21 Haslanger (1995) proposes a similar view about gender, according to which genders are socially con-
structed but nevertheless exist and are real.
biological kinds but socially constructed, it is “up to us” how to construct them, or to altogether give up on the racial categorizations of people.

Now an example from mathematical ontology. Nominalists deny the truth of propositions that may appear obvious and unassailable. For example, five is a number, which trivially entails that numbers exist. Which sort of evidence could possibly override the conclusion of this straightforward argument? Many philosophers think that no evidence could possibly have this effect, which results in a powerful objection to nominalism. One strategy that nominalists may employ in response to this objection is to grant that numbers exist, and to argue that numbers nevertheless are not genuine constituents of reality (Fine, 2009). This move gives up the letter of nominalism, but retains the spirit. The distinction between things that are and things that are not real then is often drawn with appeal to broadly relativist ideas. For example, Fine (2001, p. 27) proposes to distinguish between realism and anti-realism as two different views about grounding facts. Grounding is a metaphysical dependence relations. If a fact A is grounded in another fact B, then A holds “in virtue of” B; B provides a metaphysical explanation for A. Fine proposes that, if the existence of numbers is grounded in other facts, then numbers are not genuine constituents of reality, since only ungrounded facts are genuine constituents of reality.

I will now turn to views on which certain facts—even though they exist—hold only relatively to something else. For example, Lewis (1968, p. 122) argues that an object’s essential property is the property it shares with all its counterparts, and Lewis (1986, p. 254) argues that there are multiple counterpart relations. Putting these two ideas together yields that which properties of an object are its essence is relative to a counterpart relation.

See, for example, Thomasson’s (2015) “easy” arguments for the existence of numbers.

Analogous conceptions play an important role in various branches of philosophy of science, such as philosophy of biology (see Brigandt and Love, 2017). According to so-called reductionists, each biological system (such as an organism) is constituted by nothing but (or reduces to) molecules and their interactions. The relevant notion of reduction can be spelled out using the notion of grounding. Some reductionists say that biological facts are grounded in molecular facts. Assuming that grounded facts are not real, these reductionists embrace a form of anti-realism about biological facts.
One could flesh out this view by arguing that propositions about objects’ essential properties are true or false only relative to a counterpart relation. Lewis did not put his view this way; but it is an option. As a second example, consider modal conventionalism: the view that what’s necessary or possible depends on conventions for re-identifying objects in various possible worlds (Sidelle, 2002). For example, water has the molecular structure $H_2O$; and we accept conventions for the cross-world identification of water according to which whatever shares water’s molecular structure is identical to water. The fact that water has the molecular structure $H_2O$ together with these conventions makes it necessary that water is $H_2O$—or so modal conventionalists argue. One could flesh out this view by arguing that propositions about what’s necessary and possible are true or false only relative to a convention. Sidelle (2002) does not put his view this way; but it is an option.

A view on which certain facts—even though they exist—hold only relatively to something else can be developed in various ways. For instance, one could draw use the notion of grounding: ungrounded facts are in a sense absolute; but grounded facts hold only relative to their grounds. I will here discuss two further options: first, truth relativism, and then a certain modal conception.

Truth relativists, such as MacFarlane (2014), think that the truth-value of some propositions depends on the context from which they are assessed. Some propositions are true as assessed from context $c_1$ but false as assessed from context $c_2$. For example, relativists about matters of taste think that the proposition that cilantro is tasty is true or false only relative to a context of assessment which supplies a standard of taste. If speaker $A$ does not like cilantro and is located at context $c_1$, then the proposition that cilantro is tasty is false as assessed from $c_1$. But if speaker $B$ likes cilantro and is located at context $c_2$, then the very same proposition is true as assessed from $c_2$.

Metaphysical anti-realists who want to propose a version of truth relativism need to answer one main question. What is the new nonstandard parameter, whose values are supplied by contexts of assessment? For truth relativists about predicates of personal
taste the answer is obvious: the new parameter is a standard of taste. But what about other sorts of metaphysical relativism, such as perhaps relativism about modal facts?24

Einheuser (2006) develops a generic template that can help metaphysical anti-realists to answer this question. Einheuser suggests that each world is composed of a perspective independent substratum and a perspective dependent carving. One of the substrata is the unique actual substratum. The actual substratum is compatible, however, with several carvings—none of which is uniquely actual. The semantic values of declarative sentences are not ordinary propositions but sets of pairs \( \langle s, c \rangle \), where \( s \) is a substratum and \( c \) a carving. Suppose now that the actual substratum \( s@ \) is compatible with two carvings, \( c_1 \) and \( c_2 \). A set \( A \) of ordered pairs \( \langle s, c \rangle \) may be such that \( \langle s@, c_1 \rangle \in A \) but \( \langle s@, c_2 \rangle \notin A \). In that case, \( A \) is true at \( \langle s@, c_1 \rangle \) but false at \( \langle s@, c_2 \rangle \). Next, one just needs to define ‘true’ as a two-place predicate that applies to semantic contents only relative to contexts of assessment; in such a way that \( A \) is true relative to contexts of assessments that supply carving \( c_1 \) and false relative to contexts of assessment that supply carving \( c_2 \).

To make use of Einheuser’s template, metaphysical relativists have to explain which sorts of entities make up the substratum, and how one may impose a carving on a substratum. Some versions of metaphysical anti-realism have a straightforward explanation.25 Consider, for instance, Sidelle’s (2002) modal conventionalism. We can explicitly develop this view as a form of relativism by arguing that non-modal facts provide a sort of perspective-independent substratum onto which conventions for cross-world identifications then impose a perspective-dependent modal structure. One may then argue that the semantic values of sentences concerning what’s possible and what’s necessary are set

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24 Sidelle (2002) argues that modal facts depend on conventions, which is a view that could be spelled out as a form of relativism about modal facts.

25 Gibbard’s (2003) norm-expressivism applies Einheuser’s template in a very intuitive manner. In Gibbard’s view, the semantic values of declarative sentences are sets of pairs \( \langle w, p \rangle \), where \( w \) is a possible world and \( p \) is a hyperplan. A hyperplan is a function that represents a norm, and that maps each occasion for action in a world to a set of actions that are permitted on that occasion. On this view, norm-normative or descriptive facts, represented by possible worlds, provide a sort of perspective-independent substratum, and norms, represented by hyperplans, impose carvings onto worlds.
of substratum-carving pairs that are true or false only relative to criteria for cross-world identifications that are supplied by contexts of assessment.

Drawing a distinction between a perspective independent substratum and a perspective dependent carving is more difficult, however, for certain other versions of metaphysical anti-realism. For example, consider ontological relativism, which is the view that what exists is in some way relative. Chalmers (2009), a proponent of ontological anti-realism, suggests to represent an ontology by a “furnishing function” that maps worlds to domains of quantification. Given the notion of a furnishing function, one might argue that the semantic contents of quantified sentences are sets of pairs \( \langle w, f \rangle \), where \( w \) is a world and \( f \) is a furnishing function, and transfer Einheuser’s template to ontology in this way. However, it is not clear what a world minus a domain of quantification is. Once one sub-tracts a domain from a world, there seems nothing left that is recognizably a world. It hence seems that the distinction between worlds and domains is not well-defined, and it is unclear what the parameter \( f \) is supposed to represent.

To illustrate the difficulty, it may help to consider the case of mereology. Mereological nihilists think that only simple objects exist, universalists think that any two things compose a third, and proponents of van Inwagen’s (1995) “organicist” view think that a plurality of things \( xx \) compose some object \( y \) only if the plurality \( xx \) makes up a living being. It is tempting to think that simple objects provide a sort of substratum onto which the various mereological views impose different carvings. But this view amounts to saying that really only simple things exist. Composite objects are not genuine constituents of reality but conventionally imposed. Rather then providing for a sense in which composition facts are perspective-dependent, this view amounts to a vindication of nihilism.

An alternative to truth relativism is given by a certain modal conception (see Flocke, forthcoming). On both the relativist and the modal approach, the truth of some propositions depends on (something like) a perspective; but the two approaches explain this sort of dependence in different ways. Truth relativists defines ‘true’ in a way that rela-
tivizes truth to a context of assessment. The modal approach, on the other hand, construes perspective-dependence as a modal contingency. For example, consider a mereological universalist who thinks that any two things compose a third. On the modal approach, this universalist is seen as adopting a standpoint at which any two things compose a third. This sort of standpoint dependence can be described using modal operators: a proposition that is true at all standpoints is in a sense necessary; and a proposition that is true at only some but not all standpoints is in a sense contingent. The modal conception does not rest on a distinction between a substratum and a carving. In comparison to relativism, the modal conception is therefore better suited to provide for a sense in which the answers to existence questions may be standpoint-dependent. But a lot of work remains to be done to fully develop the modal approach. For example, what kind of modality is perspective-dependence? Is it a more epistemic or more metaphysical modality? These and other questions require answers.

5 Conclusion

My work in this article has both a problem-solving and a problem-finding component. The main problem I wanted to solve is to develop a systematic distinction of the different ways in which one can be a metaphysical anti-realist. To this end, I have first distinguished between views according to the type of entity which they concern. Some versions of metaphysical anti-realism deny the existence of certain objects; others deny the existence of kinds, relations or facts. I then discussed the role of relativistic ideas in this landscape. Some metaphysical anti-realists grant that certain objects—numbers, say—exist, but maintain that they exist only relatively to something else; perhaps because their existence is grounded in the existence of other things. Other anti-realists grant that certain facts—modal facts, say—exist, but maintain that they hold only relatively to something; perhaps something like conventions for re-identifying objects in other possible worlds.

Through solving this one problem I also found a couple new ones. For one, I have
merely distinguished between various ways of being an anti-realist. But the various approaches need not be equally good! One important question for future research concerns an evaluation of the comparative advantages and disadvantages of the various approaches. Second, I have merely sketched the different approaches to anti-realism at a very high level of abstraction. Another important line of future inquiry concerns the details. Consider, for instance, the view that mathematical propositions have a merely relative truth-value. How could you spell out the details of this view?

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