Abstract: Ross and Spurrett appear convinced that the world must have a unified ontological structure. This conviction is difficult to reconcile with a commitment to mainstream realism, which involves allowing that the world might be ontologically disunified. Ross and Spurrett should follow Kitcher by weakening their conception of unification, so as to allow for the possibility of ontological disunity.

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Ontological disunity and a realism worth having

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Abstract

Ross and Spurrett appear convinced that the world must have a unified ontological structure. This conviction is difficult to reconcile with a commitment to mainstream realism, which involves allowing that the world might be ontologically disunified. Ross and Spurrett should follow Kitcher by weakening their conception of unification, so as to allow for the possibility of ontological disunity.
According to Ross and Spurrett “Science aims to tell us how the world is structured, that is, how its various processes and classes of entities constitute a single working machine.” (p. 34). They consider this claim to be “… crucial to any sort of realism worth having …” (p. 34). Ross and Spurrett’s crucial claim sits very awkwardly with a consideration that is usually taken to be part and parcel of a serious commitment to realism. This is the requirement that the world be conceived of as existing independently of our thinking about it – the realist requirement of mind-independence. The committed realist will be on the lookout for unwarranted presuppositions that we bring to our interpretation of the world, and will attempt to get by without such presuppositions. The assertion that science aims to tell us how the various aspects of the world collectively constitutes a ‘single working machine’ looks like it is based on the presupposition that the world must be a single working machine. From the perspective of a mainstream realist, who is committed to a conception of the world as mind-independent, this is an unwarranted presupposition, because it seems possible that the world is not a single working machine.

Ross and Spurrett do not do much to unpack the phrase ‘single working machine’, and it might be thought that the above line of reasoning could be evaded, if their commitment to a conception of the world as a single working machine was interpreted in a sufficiently nebulous way. However, Ross and Spurrett appear to disqualify themselves from adopting this line of defense, by explicitly identifying Nancy Cartwright’s (1999) “dappled world” thesis – the view that the world is ontologically disunified, lacking unifying laws, kinds, or other universal ontological categories – as a thesis that is incompatible with the claim that the world is a single working machine (p. 54, n. 20). Their conception of the world as a single
working machine involves the assumption that the world must have a unified ontological structure.

Ross and Spurrett cite recent work, due to Spurrett, which takes issue with Cartwright’s claim that there is strong evidence that the world is ontologically disunified (p. 54, n. 20). I agree with Spurrett that Cartwright (1999) has not done enough to warrant this conclusion. Nevertheless, it surely is possible that the world is ontologically disunified. We do not have to insist that the world is ontologically disunified to have grounds to doubt the claim that the world must have a unified ontological structure. We can be ‘agnostic dapplers’, to invoke Lipton’s (2002) terminology, remaining open to the possibility that the world is ontologically disunified, as well as remaining open to the possibility that it is ontologically unified. If we adopt this sensible open-minded attitude, then an insistence that the world must be ontologically unified remains in tension with the realist ambition to depict the world as it is, independent of our presuppositions about it, because we remain open to the possibility that we are living in a disunified world.

Ross and Spurrett associate the claim that there is a unified ontological structure to the world with the work of Philip Kitcher and they draw heavily on Kitcher’s unificationist account of explanation, in an effort to identify a form of explanatory unification that is suitable to their conception of science. Their reliance of Kitcher is unfortunate because Kitcher has long recognised that the presumption that the world must be ontologically unified is a weakness of his unificationist approach to explanation. In his words “… it looks as though the approach must defend the prima facie implausible thesis that the world is necessarily unified … ” (1989, p. 496). Kitcher’s initial response to this problem was to “… recommend rejecting the idea that there are causal truths that are independent of our search for order in the phenomena.
Taking a cue from Kant and Peirce, we adopt a different view of truth and correctness.” (1989, p. 487). This is a solution to the problem created by the possibility of ontological disunity, but it is not a solution that genuine realists – which Ross and Spurrett purport to be – should be happy to endorse. In effect Kitcher is proposing that we compromise realist ambitions by adopting a Kantian position in which order is, at least in part, projected onto the world. Kitcher (1989, 1994) is quite explicit about the Kantian flavor of his views.

Recently Kitcher has undergone a change of heart. He now tells us that his “… grand project of articulating the most unified vision of nature that we could achieve … is mistaken.” (1999, p. 347) In 1989 Kitcher was a grand unifier, but 1999 Kitcher is an advocate of ‘Modest unificationism’. Modest unificationism involves accepting that “… the world may be a disorderly place, that the understanding of its diverse phenomena may require us to employ concepts that cannot be neatly integrated.” (1999, p. 339). Modest unificationism involves looking for unity where we can find it, while accepting that there may be limits to the amount of unity that is there to be found. It is a position that should be congenial to genuine realists, because it does not involve presuppositions about the ontological structure of the world.

Ross and Spurrett begin by observing that “Philosophy progresses with a tide-like dynamic” (p. x) The low tide of logical positivism was more than half a century ago, but it seems that the high water mark of realism has not quite been reached, if their article is any guide. Their conviction that science should aim to describe the world as a single working machine appears to be an unwarranted remnant of the strong unificationism characteristic of the heyday of logical positivism. Kitcher has abandoned a similar conviction and I can only urge Ross and Spurrett to follow his lead. Mainstream realism is compatible with the very weak
unificationism that Kitcher (1999) now advocates, but not with the form of unificationism that Ross and Spurrett currently favor.

References


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