

## Reality

...the word “reality” is generally used *with the intention of evoking sentiment*. It is a grand word for a peroration. “The right honourable speaker went on to declare that the concord and amity for which he had unceasingly striven had now become a reality (loud cheers).” The conception which it is so troublesome to apprehend is not “reality” but “reality (loud cheers).”

--Sir Arthur Eddington

Epistemology, explanationism in particular, has always instigated the question of the relation of beliefs and other representations to the external world. Indeed, epistemology explicitly asks whether we have any reason to believe in the external world at all, and as I noted in Chapter 7, explanationism has often been felt to raise skeptical questions parallel to those occasioned by Lockean representationalism.

### I “REALISM”

On the question of the external world, I can be mercifully brief. Our reason for believing in public, middle-sized objects is of the same kind as our reason for believing in anything else: that that belief is entailed by what is by far the most satisfactory explanation of regularities in our experience, of ways in which we are systematically appeared to. To reject it would be to create intolerable mysteries. If the competing hypothesis is proposed that we are brains in vats—more properly, that *I* am a brain in a vat, the rest of you being only my mistaken explanatory posits—I grant that that hypothesis is perfectly coherent and logically consistent with the character of my current experience. But it raises vexing and unanswerable questions: Who is thus manipulating my mind? For what possible reason? Why and how did that person choose to produce in me just the particular sequence of experiences (as of my entire life to date, just exactly as it happens to have run) that he or she did? And so on and so forth. Moreover, from the principle of conservatism defended in Chapter 8 we can extrapolate a burden-of-proof doctrine to the effect that appearances should be taken at face value in the absence of any special reason to doubt them or reject them as misleading. Thus, if asked how I know I am not a brain in a vat, all I can say is that I have every explanatory reason to think I am not one and no reason at all to suspect that I am one. If it is then asked why I think that this is a good argument or why the considerations I have just mentioned should be taken to count against the vat hypothesis, I refer the questioner back to Chapter 7. Thus, explanationism does not in itself raise any proper doubt about the external world.

Readers of the current literature on “realism” and “antirealism,” of lamentably various sorts, will know that the preceding argument does not even begin to address that literature. The ordinary philosophers’ use of the term “realism” is now all but forgotten: You are a *realist about Xs* (about public physical objects, subatomic particles, numbers, moral properties, ...) if you believe that there really are Xs in some literal, face-value sense of that clause (as opposed to some revisionary, neologistic sense). There is nothing very interesting about

“realism” when it is understood in that way; to deny realism about public physical objects is to be an idealist, or at best an eliminative phenomenalist of some sort, and thereby to incur all the appalling onus of defending such an uncommonsensual and cranky position. But such is not the intention of contemporary “antirealists.”

## II TWO OTHER RECENT SENSES OF “REALISM”

Michael Devitt once wrote, “Between the two of them, Hilary Putnam and Michael Dummett have managed to shed almost impenetrable darkness on the notion of realism.” Putnam (1978 and elsewhere) distinguishes between “internal realism” and “external realism,” claiming to uphold the former while rejecting the latter as rather silly superstition. Dummett (1978) idiosyncratically means by “realism about *Xs*” something to the effect that statements about *Xs* are either true or false, and his judgment on such a point of truth-valuedness per se is guided by rather crassly verificationist considerations. Moreover, Dummett’s usage is ineliminably metalinguistic, having to do with *truth* and the nature of the truth predicate.

I have briefly addressed Dummett’s problematic (1984a, Section II of Chapter 10), and I shall not repeat myself here.<sup>1</sup> But a few words on Putnam are in order, especially since his distinction just mentioned and his attack on “external” realism are widely discussed and thought important. The first thing to note is that his internal-external distinction is breathtakingly obscure. Sometimes (e.g., in Putnam [1981], Chap. 3), it sounds as though “external realism” is an outlandish straw man, something like the following view (a gloss of my own, not a quotation):

Everything exists entirely independently of human language and the human mind, including human language and the human mind. Moreover, there is an omniscient and omnipotent God Who has ordained a system of natural kinds quite independently of human perception or human purposes. Moreover human beings can step out from behind their perceptual systems and conceptual schemes and eyeball naked reality without benefit of any such things. Moreover, the earth sits on the back of a giant cosmic turtle, which is what holds the earth up.

Putnam is at pains to convince us that the view just stated (which we may call Turtle Realism) is false. He succeeds effortlessly, in my case; I have never been tempted by Turtle Realism. Nor have I ever known anyone who was.

Caricatures aside,<sup>2</sup> Putnam gives one clue to his internal-external distinction in his discussion of brains in vats (1978, 1981): At some points he seems to equate external realism simply with belief in the conceptual possibility that one is a brain in a vat, being globally deceived as by an Evil Demon. And along with other well-known twentieth-century philosophers, Putnam rejects that possibility; he thinks that in the end it is *not* conceptually possible for my experiences internally to be just as they are and yet also to be the mendacious products of the Demon’s or mad scientist’s dream machine, and he gives at least one very clear and explicit argument to that effect (1981, Chap. 1). Other prominent philosophers have given quite different arguments for the same conclusion: Carnap and Ayer, verificationist arguments; Wittgenstein, a criteriological argument (see Lycan [1971]); J. L. Austin (1962), an “excluded-opposites” argument; Jay Rosenberg (1980), a Kantian argument.

So there is, after all, a clear issue between Putnam et al. and actual contemporary people who call themselves “realists” and who can claim the title of “external realist,” even though “external realism,” in the present sense, bears no relation at all to Turtle Realism and could not possibly be taken to deserve scoffing or deriding, even if one disagrees with it. “External realism” in this sense (call it “Vat Realism”) is just the view that, consistently with the character of my present experience, it is conceptually possible that I am a brain in a vat, being deceived by some uncannily successful producer of lifelike illusions. There are plenty of Vat Realists around. I am one.

In defense of Vat Realism I can again be mercifully brief. *Prior to philosophical argument*, I think anyone—ordinary person or philosopher alike—would grant the bare possibility of having totally illusory experiences throughout one’s life. Indeed, global deception is almost *technologically* possible; never mind fantasy and science fiction on the scale of time travel or alternative universes. That the possibility of global deception is still *technologically remote and fanciful* I grant, of course. Its remoteness and fancifulness are just what made me say, in Section I, that we have no earthly reason to entertain it. But the Evil Demon hypothesis is a powerfully entrenched modal intuition. (If it were not so powerfully entrenched, Descartes could not have succeeded in worrying hundreds of generations of philosophers about skepticism.) Thus, Vat Realism seems true, on its face.

Powerful “modal intuitions” have been mistaken before. For example, people thought for years that water might not be composed of H<sub>2</sub>O, and some people still claim to find it obvious that the phenomenal states of conscious subjects could occur independent of the subjects’ functional or physical states<sup>3</sup> or that Cicero might not have been Tully. But a modal intuition of possibility is a datum and demands to be explained away, even if, dialectically speaking, it creates only a *prima facie* case for the genuineness of the possibility in question.

The arguments of the philosophers I have mentioned (Putnam, Carnap, Ayer, Wittgenstein, et al.), of course, constitute attempts to explain away the Vat intuition. Those philosophers contend precisely that the intuition is specious and confused. But I think it is clear that they bear the onus of proof. If they maintain of something that seems perfectly possible to ordinary people and to most philosophers that it is in fact *conceptually impossible*, we have to see and assess the argument. Absent a proof seen to be sound, our original possibility remains unscathed.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, such a proof would be a very exciting philosophical item, to be exclaimed over as if it were a new baby.<sup>5</sup>

I cannot here set out and rebut all of the arguments I have mentioned; let me just go on record as stating that no such argument that I have ever seen has succeeded. Each of the arguments relies on some substantive premise that is far from being a “conceptual truth”: a meat-ax version of verificationism, or a claim to the effect that a substantive epistemological principle is analytic (when it is not), or a metaphysical or psychological premise about the nature of mental representation. A few of these premises may possibly be true and may even assist in showing that we are not brains in vats, but they do not

thereby show that the Vat hypothesis is conceptually impossible or incoherent. It is not conceptually impossible or incoherent. Vat Realism is still rather obviously true.

### III BACK TO THE REAL WORLD

Let us remind ourselves, especially if we have been rereading Putnam, Dummett, or another fashionable antirealist, that except on specific and idiosyncratic philosophical grounds we do not doubt the existence of floors, rugs, other people, other galaxies, or electrons. We accept all of those, and on more or less explanationist grounds. (Let us call this acceptance Basic Realism.)<sup>6</sup> And we are justified in doing so, though far from infallibly justified; such is the lesson of Chapter 7. The only occasion for philosophical concern about that justification would be a very hard-hitting philosophical argument specifically to the contrary.

I cannot easily think of an argument that does not essentially involve a combination of metaphor with sarcasm (“Oh, I suppose you think you can step out from behind your perceptions and conceptual scheme and just eyeball... [etc., etc.]”). “Arguments” of this type can be peremptorily dismissed; once genuine transcendental reasoning against Vat Realism has failed (assuming it does fail), the only argument worth considering would be one whose conclusion was that there *are not* really floors, rugs, or electrons and that the existence of those items is an illusion. Absent such an argument (or a good argument for a radical skepticism in epistemology, which skepticism is abhorrent to the antirealist), we are perfectly justified, *in the fullest accepted sense of “justified,”* in thinking that there are such things.

Many self-styled antirealists would agree with my claim, couched as it is in the object language, that there are floors and rugs and even electrons. Their disagreement locates itself at a higher level of discourse. It has to do with the meta-metalinguistic interpretation of notions of truth and reference or else with the proper understanding of scientific method. That there are substantive issues to be fought out in these areas I do not deny. My point is only that (1) those issues do not affect Basic Realism, which is the most important metaphysical issue, and that (2) these issues are quite remote from basic epistemology and the question of how our beliefs about the external world and so forth are justified. Our beliefs are justified in the way I have said they are justified. This has nothing to do with the ultimate nature of truth, with the semantical interpretation of anyone’s words or thoughts,<sup>7</sup> with the nature of a conceptual scheme, or with any doctrine regarding natural kinds.<sup>8</sup> Those are different matters entirely, or at least, if someone disagrees about that, we would have to see an argument, clearly spelled out, that led from some set of premises regarding any such matters to a conclusion incompatible with any plausible account of epistemic justification, and I have never seen any even faintly convincing argument of this type. Certainly any number of views of truth, language, representation, natural kinds, and so forth are compatible with everything I said in Chapters 7 and 8.

I am (perhaps) assuming or presupposing something that some antirealist readers would not grant: that, as Quine has taught us, *there is no first philosophy*. A felicitous explanatory coordination of common sense and science is the only test of truth; as we saw in Chapter 6,

there is no further external Archimedean standpoint from which an independent, peculiarly philosophical method could get a grip and critique common sense and science together at the same time. If an opponent thinks I am mistaken about this, let him or her produce such a method and show how it resists the Quinean argument I presented in Chapter 6.

#### IV SKEPTICISM AND REALITY

I close this chapter by offering a quick diagnosis of the antirealism disease and repudiating one very common type of skeptical argument against explanationism.

The diagnosis of antirealism is simple, and rather than try to offer historical support, I shall leave my readers to confirm the diagnosis against their own textual experience. Bluntly, antirealism in most of its forms comes from *morbid fear of skepticism*. Scratch almost any antirealist argument or “argument,” and you find a premise that is really a lemma; lurking behind it is an assumed conditional to the effect that if the premise were not true, then reality would be forever hidden from us, and we could never have any good reason to trust our senses, and so forth. Such background conditionals are rarely argued for, since they are rarely made explicit, nor in my experience can support be readily supplied once the conditionals are brought out into the open. I shall give two brief examples.

It is often objected against Locke’s representationalist realism that Locke’s view leads directly to radical skepticism; a Lockean subject is barricaded behind an impenetrable wall of ideas, and so forth, and so cannot know anything of the noumenal goings-on behind that wall. The first conjunct of the latter sentence is mere metaphor, and the second, intended as a justified intermediate conclusion, does not in the least follow from anything that the first might mean when taken naturally and literally. In particular, a Lockean representationalist might also be an explanationist, quite justifiably adducing hypotheses about the external world from regularities holding within the “wall of ideas” directly open to his scrutiny. Explanationism may not in the end be true, but it is not logically false; no one could rationally suggest that the Lockean view *entails* skepticism.

My second example is that of a kind of skeptical move often made against ampliative inference generally, and against explanatory inference in particular, already mentioned in Chapter 7. Suppose Jones claims that *P*. Smith, an ordinary person, demands to hear Jones’s evidence. Jones provides evidence *E*, the sort of evidence we would normally take as virtually conclusive in support of *P*. Smith subsides. But Brown, a professional philosopher, demands to know by what right Jones holds *that E supports P*, stating or implying that if Jones cannot himself answer this metaquestion, his right to maintain that *P* is forfeit, or at least he cannot lay claim to a belief that “corresponds to reality.” (“Yes, I know people cite things like *E* when making claims like *P*—that is our custom—but what evidence do you have that *P* is *really true*, in the sense of corresponding to reality?”)

Brown’s conditional is completely without motivation or force. Jones’s failings as an epistemologist cast no reflections whatever on Jones’s right to claim that *P*. If *E does* support *P*, and if Jones believes that *P* on the basis of *E*, then there is no further question of whether Jones is justified in thinking it is “really true” that *P*. To be justified in believing

that *P* is to be justified in thinking it is really true that *P*, really really true that *P*, really and truly really true that *P*, and as far down that road as anyone might care to go.

I have suggested that antirealist feelings are stoked by fear of skepticism. But if skepticism is entailed by a philosophical position, and if skepticism is bad, then perhaps the fear is reasonable and the ensuing antirealism warranted.

I am not sure skepticism is all that bad; it depends on how radically it is formulated. Probably some modest forms of skepticism are true, as Armstrong says. But in any case, as I have already intimated, it is hard to find a sound argument taking us from any common theory of epistemic justification, or for that matter any plausible set of premises, to a seriously skeptical conclusion (unless it is my own argument against Armstrong's particular theory, offered in Chapter 5). We are all well acquainted with skeptical arguments of the sort we examine in our graduate epistemology courses, and we are all well acquainted with the standard criticisms of those arguments: The arguments commit modal fallacies, beg the question, illegitimately presuppose the KK thesis, and so forth. Most have *multiple* flaws of a textbook nature. Now, if two thousand years of epistemology have failed to produce a plausible argument for skepticism, even in conjunction with an initially plausible theory of epistemic justification, then skepticism is surely nothing to get all upset about—certainly not to the point of abandoning the real world. At the very least, we should not even think of abandoning the real world solely on the basis of a *purely philosophical* argument. Electrons, rocks, and probably even cockroaches will be here long after all the philosophers are gone.

## Footnotes to Chapter 10

<sup>1</sup>See also Devitt (1983, 1984), which are as thorough and effective an exploration of the relation between Dummett's arguments and ontology as I think ever need be made.

<sup>2</sup>The "aside" here is an ambitious one. The current realism-antirealism literature consists very largely of satiric metaphorical characterizations of the "realism" being attacked, followed (on the antirealist side) by appropriate scoffing. I invite any reader who has the stomach for it to cull the antirealist literature for (1) a crisp *literal* statement of the view being rejected; (2) documentary evidence that anyone since perhaps the seventeenth century has held that view; and (3) a crisp, literal, and convincing argument against it. I am not holding my breath.

<sup>3</sup>For elaborate diagnosis of this tendency, see my *Consciousness* (1987).

<sup>4</sup>"Proof" here need not be taken philosophically. E.g., the scientific identification of a natural kind will do, as in the discovery that water is in fact composed of H<sub>2</sub>O.

<sup>5</sup>For some of us there would be a downside, pointed out by Rorty (1973): If one could show a priori that most of our common beliefs about the external world must be true, and particularly if one could show that this guarantee holds in virtue of the meanings of words (à la Wittgenstein) or otherwise by convention, the victory is hollow, for a kind of linguistic idealism results. We would have thereby shown that external reality is partly constituted by human language and is not (as we commonsensically take it to be) entirely independent of the thought processes of conscious subjects. Putnam (as presently construed) is right: the Vat hypothesis is the key. With Rorty, I would say that the hypothesis must be at least conceptually, if not metaphysically, possible if any substantive form of realism is true at all. Putnam evidently disagrees on this last point, since he seems to think that his "internal realism" is worth saving and cherishing. But like many other readers of the realism-antirealism corpus, I do not see how one can reject Vat Realism without falling into the silly view that truth and reality are just what our friends will let us get away with.

<sup>6</sup>Basic Realism, coupled with the repudiation of any interestingly stronger thesis, is very close to what Arthur Fine (1984a, 1984b) calls the Natural Ontological Attitude, or NOA. I am sympathetic to NOA and more generally to Fine's elegant writings on this topic, but Fine sees NOA as an important species of antirealism ("Realism is dead" [1984b]), whereas I do not. (Both of us firmly reject Turtle Realism.)

<sup>7</sup>To quote Michael Devitt again (conversation): "When someone starts talking about 'interpretation', reach for your gun."

<sup>8</sup>Of all things. Readers of the current antirealist literature will confirm how strangely the matter is mixed up with questions about natural kinds that have prima facie nothing to do with the issue of existence or reality.