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The Case for Idealism by John Foster

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to state that, “the ‘coherence theory of truth’ . . . is sometimes taken to imply that justification may thus be circular.” Finally, he argues that the coherence theory of truth does not in fact imply a coherence theory of justification. For even if we accept a coherence theory of truth, we can always ask of any proposition what justifies us in believing that it coheres properly with the rest of our beliefs. I agree that a coherence theory of truth does not imply a coherence theory of justification. In fact, I do not even want to endorse a coherence theory of truth. Chisholm still hasn’t provided an argument against holding a coherence theory of justification, one that revolves around a principle like “inference to the best explanation.” Without the requisite argument, and without a more compelling story regarding the justification of the epistemic principles, I don’t see much merit to Chisholm’s, or any other version of foundationalism.

One last note. Throughout the book, especially in the first half, there are many more than the average number of misprints, sometimes seriously affecting the intelligibility of the text.

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THE CASE FOR IDEALISM. By JOHN FOSTER. Boston, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982. Pp. ix, 309.

This book attempts to revive phenomenalism by using concepts taken from current versions of nonreductive materialism. Although most philosophers today would agree that phenomenalism was put to rest several decades ago by Smart and others, that was a phenomenalism committed to reducing material object language to talk about sense data. Foster wants to defend a phenomenalism that makes no such commitment. Like materialists who deny that reduction in ontology necessarily implies reduction of language, Foster proposes an ontological phenomenalism that does not claim to establish equivalence between physical and phenomenalist talk. *The Case for Idealism* is a sustained effort to show not only that such a phenomenalist picture is coherent but also to establish that physical realism is untenable and that phenomenalism is the most plausible of the idealist alternatives.

Foster’s book is divided into five parts. Part I outlines various realist and idealist positions and formulates the thesis he defends: that physical objects and physical facts are the “logical product” of the way our experience

is constrained. For Foster that means the existence of physical objects and the obtaining of physical facts (1) follows necessarily from, (2) is achieved through, and (3) is nothing over above the way experience is constrained. Part II of the book begins the defense of this ambitious claim by arguing that our concept of the physical is “topic neutral”—that it makes no inherent commitment to a physical ontology.

In Part III Foster tries to establish by a *priori* argument that the physical cannot be part of “ultimate reality,” that is, that it is the logical product of something nonphysical. His argument turns on the idea that physical geometry is determined by physical laws; and since the latter can vary across possible worlds, physical points must vary as well.

Part IV then argues against those who would use Foster’s anti-realist arguments to draw skeptical conclusions about the existence of physical objects and physical truth; Foster also tries to explain in this section how we can retain physical truths within the context of a phenomenalist ontology. Part V ends the book with a discussion of time.

Foster obviously tries to do a great deal. He provides a mass of arguments bearing on, among other things, realism and its formulation, traditional metaphysical questions about space and matter, alternative versions of idealism, and the nature of time. For the purposes of this review I want to concentrate on what seems most ingenious about his project: his application to phenomenalism of concepts used by contemporary materialists. Borrowing directly from Smart and Armstrong’s notion of “topic neutrality,” Foster argues that we can circumvent the apparent difference in nature between the physical and phenomenal realms by denying that physical language and concepts make any inherent ontological commitment. In fact Foster’s version of the topic neutral thesis goes one step further: our physical concepts do not give us “the faintest idea of what nonmental space and its nonmental occupants may be like” (p. 122).

Not surprisingly, Foster does not present a convincing case for this thesis. His primary argument runs as follows. Science can tell us nothing more about the “intrinsic nature” (the term is his) of matter than that material particles are three-dimensional substances in physical space and have certain capacities and a corresponding nomological organization. But when we ask about the inherent nature of physical space—Foster takes space as conceptually prior to matter—the best we can give is a set-theoretical representation of its topology. But that formal structure, Foster says, makes no inherent commitment to physical concepts—indeed, it gives us no positive conception of the physical. Hence our physical concepts involve nothing more than the notion of points in a three-dimensional medium.

This argument seems to work only by confusing an uninterpreted set-theoretical representation of something with what is being represented. If

our concept of the physical involves *only* the notion of three-dimensionality, it is surely physical, spatial three-dimensionality. Foster's formal representation, uninterpreted, could describe any thing that can be represented by a three-place relation. Thus Foster's formal account captures the "intrinsic nature" of the physical only if its terms are taken as referring to *physical* distance, *physical* space, etc.—but then it does not show that our notion of the physical involves nothing more than a topic-neutral three-dimensionality.

The problems Foster faces are perhaps ones inherent in any topic neutral thesis of the sort he employs. If topic neutrality requires an analysis of "the concept" or "intrinsic nature" of something in language from a completely different realm, then we are seemingly committed to reduction in a strong sense and all the problems that come with it. Topic neutral analyses can possibly avoid such problems by being less ambitious—by construing their analyses as either proposed revisions in language use or as ways of fixing reference whose support lies elsewhere than in capturing "the concept" of something.¹

Foster's positive account of phenomenalism aims in large part to (1) block skeptical conclusions about physical truth that might follow from his anti-realist arguments and (2) show how the physical can be the logical product of the way sense experience is organized without thereby entailing that we can produce equivalences between phenomenal and physical language. He argues convincingly that a domain A can have entities whose existence both follows necessarily from and is nothing over and above the entities of some second domain B, without it thereby following that we can deduce from knowledge of B alone that A exists or the facts about A.

However, Foster's point on its own does not resolve the standard problems with phenomenalism. Why should we believe that the phenomenal facts necessarily imply or determine all the relevant physical truths? Just how can it be that our physical terms refer to phenomenal entities? Non-reductionist materialists have developed numerous tools to answer similar questions about the primacy of the physical: the notions of token identity, revisions of mentalistic language, the achievements of neurophysiology, the alleged special status of physics vis-à-vis the other sciences, etc. Foster apparently needs something similar to explain, for example, how the constraints on my experience necessarily imply that there are publicly observable objects which persist over time. These are traditional problems for phenomenalism and it seems that even Foster's version must answer them in some way.

¹Michael Levin has suggested and developed to some extent this latter route in his *Metaphysics and the Mind-Body Problem* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

Unfortunately, Foster does not explain how such problems are answered by his account. In fact, there is not a single reference to the standard literature on phenomenalism nor are there references to the debate over conventionalist interpretations of physical geometry, a debate that seems closely connected to Foster's anti-realism argument. As a result, one reads Foster's many arguments sometimes wondering whom he is arguing with and why.

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THE CONCEPT OF IDENTITY. By ELI HIRSCH. New York, Oxford University Press, 1982. Pp. x, 318. \$23.50.

Hirsch advocates a 'relativist' approach to persistence according to which "there is not, and cannot conceivably be, an 'intrinsic' unity through time, in the sense of a unity that cannot be adequately redescribed in different terms" (p. 162). The idea is something like this. We can correctly describe certain situations as cases in which one entity persists, or continues to exist, throughout a certain period of time. But any such One Entity Description can in theory be supplanted by an equally correct description of the same situation posed in terms of a *succession* of distinct things. We needn't choose between the *One Entity Description* and the *Succession Description*, since the two not only are not inconsistent but are in some sense equivalent. In short, advocates of Persistence Relativism (henceforth '*PR* theorists') claim that "the persistence of any conceivable entity can be construed as a 'mere succession', if we want to look at it that way" (p. 162). I have reservations about this. Perhaps the most likely proposal for working out 'succession' construals of ordinary 'one entity' persistence talk is in terms of temporal parts or (Hirsch's phrase) *body-stages*. But when one looks closely it is not obvious that Succession Descriptions that are posed in terms of temporal parts are equivalent to ordinary One Entity accounts of persistence. Consider Hortense, who survives the terrible automobile accident at time t . Hortense persists, or continues to exist, at times later than t . Here we may say that there is an entity (a person, Hortense) that exists both before and after t . This entity is, to use John Mackie's nice phrase, 'all present, at any time at which it is present at all'. Note that *PR* theorists are not out to establish that this description of the situation is *mistaken*. The claim is, rather, that Hortense's story can be told