
Realism a Defensible Doctrine

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Source: *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Dec. 22, 1910, Vol. 7, No. 26 (Dec. 22, 1910), pp. 701-708

Published by: Journal of Philosophy, Inc.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2012600>

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THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHODS

REALISM A DEFENSIBLE DOCTRINE

THE realism I shall defend in this article is an epistemological doctrine. This doctrine concerns the relation which the object in knowledge sustains to our cognizing or judging consciousness; and this doctrine asserts that whenever we judge or acknowledge anything to be real, that object is not constituted and made real by our asserting or acknowledging consciousness; its realness is simply acknowledged, accepted, submitted to.

Now, obviously, it is indifferent to realism what may be the contents or whatness of that which is asserted to be real. This object may be psychical matter of fact, as the idealist holds, or it may be matter as the materialist maintains. Realism is as compatible with an idealistic theory of reality as it is with the opposing theory of materialism. Psychical beings are as real for the realist as are material beings, and real for the same reason. The mind of Robinson Crusoe, with its hopes and its fears, is as real as the rock on which this solitary man sat; and real for precisely the same reason, namely, this mind did not owe its existence and its character as real to any human mind which might have been thinking of him; and for that same reason was the rock real on which Robinson Crusoe sat. It would be no disproof of realism, could the idealist establish his ontological doctrine, that whatever is real is psychical matter of fact or experience. The sole issue between the realist and his opponent reduces itself to the question, Does that which is judged to be real depend upon the judging or the cognizing consciousness which thus knows it for its character as real? The realist answers this question in the negative; his opponent must maintain the affirmative. The matter at issue is the sort of relation which exists between a cognizing idea and its object. Does this object depend upon the idea for its character as real? The realist denies this sort of dependence; his opponent maintains it.

The only possible disproof of realism would be the establishment of the proposition, that whatever is real as object of thought and

knowledge, is real because it is made so by the mind which knows it. This disproof can be attempted in three ways.

The first of these attempts to disprove realism is made by Professor Royce in his truly great book, "The World and the Individual." This disproof is found in the third lecture in Vol. I. This lecture, as Professor Royce announces, is "devoted to a critical study of the realistic conception of what it is to be." Professor Royce's method of procedure is briefly the following: He first defines what he maintains must be the realist's meaning of reality, and then he so develops the necessary implications of this meaning, that the logical outcome is a conception of being which makes any intelligible relation of an idea to this being impossible. The realist is thereby reduced to absolute silence; he can intelligently say nothing about what he calls reality. Let us now see how this complete disproof of realism is effected; and, as far as possible in Professor Royce's own words. "Realism asserts that to be real means to be independent of ideas, which, while other than a given real being, still relates to that being." "Realism asserts that the mere knowledge of any being by any one who is not himself the being known, makes no difference whatever to that known being." It is this independence of being known which constitutes the realness of the being that is known. Now, according to Professor Royce, this independence is absolute; the object in the realist's doctrine of knowledge is in every respect indifferent to the knower; it sustains no conceivable relation to the idea that would know it; the two are a pair of absolutely unrelated, completely sundered beings. No change which might take place in either one of these beings can make any difference to the other being, save perhaps the difference between such a change being known or not being known.

Now, since the realist's cognitive idea is itself a being, as truly so as is the object of this idea, the realist must, if consistent, hold a pluralistic conception of the world, the necessary feature of which is that the many real beings exist in absolute indifference to each other; there being no relations which can conceivably exist between these beings, these individual beings can take absolutely no account of each other. Now, inasmuch as an idea or a cognitive process, if it be a fact at all, must be real just as the other beings are real, this idea or knowing process and its supposed object must be a pair of beings of which the same thing is true that is true of any two of the beings which compose this pluralistic universe. From which it inevitably follows that the realist's *idea* can take no account of that which is said to be its object; this idea can know nothing whatever. "The realistic theory, then, as we know, by its own explicit conse-

quences, and just because its real objects are totally independent of its ideas, has nothing to do with any independently real object; and has no relation to the independent external world that its own account defines." "No realist, as he himself now must consistently maintain, either knows any independent being, or has ever in idea found himself related to one, or has ever made any reference to such a being, or has ever formed or expressed an opinion regarding one, or in his own sense of the word real, really believes that there is one" (p. 136).

If this reasoning is sound, it must be admitted that it effectually disproves the doctrine of realism. The better to appreciate the seeming cogency and conclusiveness of this argument of Professor Royce, I will put it in the form of a syllogism; and as a syllogistic argument I shall then examine it. I can do so without any injustice to Professor Royce because it is his contention that he has *logically* disproved the realist's conception of being.

The syllogism will read as follows: The real beings of the realist are absolutely unrelated; no one of these beings can possess any knowledge of any other being. Now, the realist's cognitive idea and its object are a pair of such real beings: therefore this idea can not possibly have any knowledge of its pretended object. Now, of course, this syllogism is valid only if *both* its premises are valid. The propositions which form the premises of this syllogism should either be self-evident ones, or their truth should have been clearly and conclusively established. I shall show that this has not been done; Professor Royce has established neither of the propositions on which the validity of his argument against realism depends. His argument really commits the old fallacy of "petitio principii," paradoxical as this assertion may seem to my readers. Let us examine the major premise of this syllogism, in other words Professor Royce's conception of realism. When the realist says that the object in knowledge is independent of the idea which knows it, his meaning is that this object does not owe its existence and its character as real to the thought which knows it. The realist, rightly understood, denies only a certain sort of relation between the knower and the being that is known. The denial of this particular relation no more carries with it the denial of all other relations, than does the denial of a causal relation between two objects carry with it the complete unrelatedness of these objects; the relations of likeness, difference, time, space, means, and ends, may remain, if a causal relation is denied. The truth is, no realist who knows his own doctrine, maintains the sort of pluralism which Professor Royce assumes he must maintain. But even if the realist *did* hold such an ontology as Pro-

fessor Royce attributes to him, the consequence would not be what the argument of Professor Royce maintains, since the realist is not bound to accept the minor premise of this syllogism. What I maintain is, that the realist is not bound to accept either premise of this syllogism, and that if he does accept the major premise, he need not accept the minor; so that he can escape the fatal conclusion in any event. But, if our realist really knows his doctrine, he will accept neither of the premises of this syllogism. The many real beings in the pluralist's universe are not altogether unrelated, merely because they do not depend upon each other for their individual existence. *Why* can they *not* take account of each other, act upon each other, stand in all sorts of relations, the cognitive relation being one of them? What has Professor Royce done to establish the monstrous proposition, that the real beings of the pluralist are absolutely unrelated beings?

But, even supposing that this proposition *could* be established, there still remains the other proposition, the minor premise; and what has Professor Royce done toward proving this proposition? How has he shown that the realist's cognitive idea and its object are a pair of real beings in the same sense of the term in which any two beings in the pluralist's world are real? It seems to me this assertion is based upon an entire oversight or misapprehension of the nature of a cognitive idea and the character of the cognitive relation. Professor Royce appears to have confounded psychological existence with epistemological function. In its cognitive character or function, the relation between an idea and its object can with no propriety of speech be called a relation between two beings, such as may exist between two objects which this idea may know. The import of a cognitive idea is a judgment, a judging consciousness. Now, the relation between a judgment, a judging consciousness, and the object or matter with which that judgment deals, is not of the same sort as are the various relations which exist between real beings. A judgment, a judging function is not an entity, a being at all in the sense in which a pluralist regards his beings as real. This being the case, were it true that the beings in the pluralist's universe are absolutely unrelated, it would not follow that no relation can exist between the cognitive idea of the realist and the object of that idea.

I have said that Professor Royce has not offered any evidence which is competent to establish the minor premise of his argument; I should not, however, pass over his attempt to force upon the realist the fatal admission of this minor premise. Here is his reasoning: "I ask the realist: 'Is not your own idea itself a real being, or at least a part of one?' 'Come, let us reason together. If you, the realist, are a being independent of my idea of you, then are not

your own ideas a part of your own independent being?' ” I am moved to ask, Can Professor Royce be really serious in this reasoning? He must be a dull-minded realist who is caught by such a sophism. As if the realist's ideas are a part of himself, as individual bricks are a part of the wall from which they are broken. Between a thinker and his thoughts there is not the same sort of relation as exists between a total object which this thinker may have in mind and a fragment or part of that object. The relation between a realist as a being and other beings can not be regarded as identical with the relation between this realist's ideas and these other beings; so to interpret the matter is, as I have shown, to misapprehend the character of the cognitive relation. My conclusion from this examination of Professor Royce's reasoning is that, so far as any argument he has produced goes, realism remains a tenable doctrine.

I turn next to the second attempt to disprove realism, which my readers will find in Taylor's "Elements of Metaphysics."

It is along two lines of reasoning that Professor Taylor seeks to disprove the doctrine of realism:

1. He attempts to show that the realist's doctrine is untrue because it contradicts the necessary character of what is real, and the necessary relation which reality sustains to cognitive consciousness.

2. The second line of reasoning aims to show that the realist's meaning of reality is self-contradictory, since he is compelled to define the unreal in the same terms in which he defines the real.

Taking up this first line of reasoning, I will first examine this alleged contradiction between the realist's object in knowledge and the necessary character of what is real. Professor Taylor maintains that the idealistic conception of reality which he thinks he has securely established in the sections of his book which precede the one which deals with realism, has itself disproved any such conception of reality as the realist is bound to maintain. Now, even granting that Professor Taylor has established his idealistic proposition, that whatever is real is psychical matter of fact, I do not see that he has disproved realism, which, as I have shown, is quite as compatible with an idealistic ontology as with the ontology which maintains that some reality at least is non-psychical in content. If Professor Taylor admits the reality of finite minds or finite consciousness, and that a cognitive relation exists between these finite real-beings, his idealism is in itself no disproof of realism. Professor Taylor would not say, because the minds of my human fellows are in their content psychical matters of fact, and as such are real, that they must in any sense depend upon my mind if I am to have knowledge of these minds. Surely they must be present in some way to my ex-

perience if they are to be my known realities; but *how present*—as depending upon my experience for their existence as real? Hardly so. Well, the realist denies no more dependence than would Professor Taylor in the case of knowing the minds of our human fellows. I think it still remains for Professor Taylor to clearly show that realism contradicts the idealistic conception of reality, even admitting the truth of that conception.

Nor is it at all apparent to me that Professor Taylor is more successful in his second line of reasoning, which attempts to involve the realist in fatal self-contradiction. This is his method in dealing with the realist: "Can you think of sheer unreality otherwise than as that of which no mind is ever aware, of which no purpose ever has need to take account as a condition of its fulfilment?" Having got, as he supposes, the only possible answer to this question, Professor Taylor proceeds to draw the fatal net about the unsuspecting realist in this wise: "To think of it (unreality) is to attribute to it as its definition precisely that independence in which the realist finds the mark of ultimate reality"; in other words, the realist is made to define *unreality* in precisely the same terms as those in which he is supposed to define *reality*; and this is fatal to his doctrine. Now, I can not think it should be difficult for a realist to escape a snare so openly spread before him. He has but to make *this* answer to this crucial question: "I do not judge that something is unreal *because* no one is or can be aware of it, and because no purpose can take account of it; I judge something to be unreal because it contradicts that which I have already accepted to be real, because it lacks the necessary qualities or marks of that which is real. What is unreal is not unreal because, as you appear to assume, no one is aware of it, and no purpose can take account of it; the truth is, rather, that no one is aware of this something, because it *is unreal*. I do not, therefore, define what is unreal and what is real in the same terms; and your effort to entangle me in self-contradiction is quite futile."

I can not see that Professor Taylor has been in the slightest degree successful in his attempt to disprove realism. So far from this being the case, it is not difficult to find in his own doctrine much that reads very like a substantial confession to the creed of realism. Let the reader who cares to do so, note the following passages, which I think, taken in their contexts, go far toward justifying my statement. I will ask attention to a few of these statements, which, I contend, can hardly be interpreted so as to avoid a distinctly realistic meaning.

On pages 54 and 55 we read as follows: "Presence in immediate experience is a universal character of all that is real, *because* [italics

are mine] it is only in so far as anything is thus presented in immediate unity with the concrete life of feeling that it *can be given as a condition or fact* of which an individual *interest must take account* on pain of not reaching accomplishment." Now, will Professor Taylor tell me in what other terms need a realist define his *object* in cognitive experience? Can that which is declared to be a given condition or fact, on the taking account of which depends the realization of a purpose, the satisfaction of an interest, be otherwise thought of than as something which does not owe its being, its *esse*, to the mind that thus takes account of it?

Again, on page 55, it reads: "To say that reality is essentially one with immediate feeling, is only another way of saying that the real is essentially that which is of significance for the attainment of purpose." And on page 56 we are told, that *that* is real on which we are "*constrained* to take account for the fulfilment of our purposes." Now, can we be constrained to take account of anything as an objective condition on the due taking account of which depends the accomplishment of our purposes, if at the same time it is true that this same constraining condition is itself constituted or determined to be what it is by the mind that is constrained to take account of it?

Once more, take the concrete case which is given on page 56: "Suppose that some purpose of more or less importance requires my immediate presence in the next town. Then the various routes by which I may reach that town become at once circumstances of which I have to take note, and *to which I must adapt my conduct*, if my important purpose is not to be frustrated." "For simplicity's sake we will consider the case in which there happens to be only one available way. This one available way is real to me as contrasted with the infinity of mathematically possible routes, precisely because the execution of my purpose restricts me to it and to no other." The various other routes, we are told, are possible routes—not real routes—because, "no purpose compels me to adapt myself to their peculiarities or fail of my end." Now, it would seem that whatever sustains this sort of relation to our experience or our consciousness, can not in any conceivable way owe its reality to that consciousness or purpose which it thus objectively determines.

I think it is a fair conclusion from these passages that Professor Taylor has himself, unwittingly of course, accepted the realist's doctrine. And if this inference is fair, the conclusion of the whole matter as regards Professor Taylor would appear to be, that he has done rather more toward confirming the doctrine of realism than toward its disproof.

This brings me to a brief examination of the third alleged disproof

of realism. This attempted disproof moves along strictly epistemological lines. In substance it is the following: Realism is not true, because it leads to scepticism or complete agnosticism. For, if the object be what the doctrine maintains, then knowledge must consist in getting somehow a copy of this object, by an idea to which this object is essentially alien or indifferent. Whether this relation be conceived as one of copy to an original, or as agreement or symbol, it comes to essentially the same thing; there is a separation between knowing idea and known object; they are so far different that no examination of the idea can make us certain that it knows its separated and alien object. Only a mind to which both our idea and its object could be really present could tell whether a given idea in our minds was true or untrue. But for us there is no such means of ascertaining whether or not any idea which seeks correspondence with reality does so correspond. Nor have we any indisputable criterion or test of truth in the case of any idea which seeks knowledge. The admission of this fact is the confession of doubt. Now, I frankly admit that the realist's doctrine of knowledge does logically issue in this sort of scepticism. If this doctrine is true, there is no absolute certainty of truth regarding any matters of fact which transcend immediate experience. But, is the situation really otherwise with the idealist's doctrine? I think not. Idealism, no more than realism, saves us from philosophic or theoretical doubt.

I have not space in this article fully to establish this proposition; I will only in outline state the argument which I think will establish it. For idealism as for realism, in the last analysis the essence of knowing or the cognitive process is essentially the same; it consists of the interpretation of experience, the experience being the given, the here and now indisputably real. Now, the essence of this interpretation is, first, to conceive the matters of fact, whatever they are, in a certain way; and secondly, to deduce from this conception the sort of experience which should be actual, if the conception is a true one; and thirdly, to verify this conception by the agreement between its deduced experience and actual experience—our own individual experience and the experience of all other minds. The only available test of the truth of a conception is that it works well, both in making the individual's experience coherent, harmonious, and satisfying within itself, and harmonious with the experience of other individuals. Now, while a high degree of probable truth is attainable—a probable truth that is practically satisfying, as good for practical purposes as complete theoretic certainty—it remains always possible that reality may be other than our thought conceives it. Only the absolute mind can be free from this possible doubt.

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