



Professor Royce's Refutation of Realism

Author(s): W. P. Montague

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PROFESSOR ROYCE'S REFUTATION OF REALISM.

PROFESSOR ROYCE'S recently published volume of Gifford Lectures contains a refutation of realism that is particularly interesting on account of the author's novel methods of treating that well-worn topic. To examine this refutation is the object of the present paper.

Professor Royce classifies ontological systems according to the attitude taken towards the epistemological question of the relation of an idea to its object. He shows that from this point of view all of the widely divergent systems of realism agree in asserting that it is the essence of a real object to be independent of its idea. The author's method of criticism is to develop the logical implications of this attitude, and by showing them to be self-contradictory and absurd, to discredit the premise from which they follow. The steps in his argument may, I think, be stated as follows :

Realism, in asserting the independence of object and idea, asserts the existence of a world of independent beings. The first implication of such a world is what we may call the externality of all the relations subsisting between its members. The very fact that two things are independent in the realist's sense makes it incumbent on him to assume that any relations in which they may stand to one another (such, for example, as causality or correspondence) are external to the terms related. The significance of this implication will be seen later. The second is that the independence, if it is to answer to the demands of the realist, must be an absolute independence. The real object is to be regarded as so completely independent of all "mere ideas" which are held about it, that never at any period of its history, nor under any conceivable circumstances, can we suppose it to be influenced by these ideas. Nor may the realist stop here, for the third of the alleged implications of his thesis is that the independence of object and idea is a mutual independence. The object is of no more consequence to the idea

than the idea to the object ; either member of the pair could be altered to any extent, could in fact be annihilated without producing the slightest change in the other member. The author then proceeds to the last portion of his argument, which consists in the application of the realistic theory to the dilemma of monism and pluralism. The pluralistic horn of the dilemma is first considered, and two theses concerning it are laid down and proved. First, a world of many independent beings could never by any process whatever evolve into the actual world which we experience. For that world is one whose constituents are to a greater or less extent related to and mutually dependent on one another, while in the realistic world all beings are absolutely independent, and the relations in which they stand are external facts, and as such will be quite unable to bridge the chasm which divides the real beings from one another. As for the second thesis, it is nothing less than the proof that the real beings can only preserve their independence by being not merely entirely discontinuous spatially, temporally, and causally, but also by being utterly *dissimilar*—having not a single quality in common. “. . . they are sundered from one another by absolutely impassible chasms ; they can never come to get either ties or community of nature ; they are not in the same space, nor in the same time, nor in the same natural or spiritual order.”¹ In order to escape the consequences of pluralism the realist naturally turns to monism—reality is not many real facts but one real fact, a single unity, independent of all external to it, but internally a complex system of mutually dependent and mutually related elements. But this refuge is at once seen to be forbidden the realist, for “. . . there are already at least Two genuinely and absolutely independent real Beings in the realistic world.”² These two are the object and the idea of the object, and “ideas, even the most false ones, are facts in the mental world,” and as such can never be joined or related, or made to correspond in any way whatsoever. Hence the dialectic which has just proved so deadly in the pluralistic world applies with equal force to realistic monism. No world at all is possible for

¹ *The World and the Individual*, Vol. I, pp. 131, 132.

² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

the realist, and as a parting shot the critic grimly applies the consequences of the general theory to the special case of the realist's own idea of his real world, that idea being shown to be intrinsically unrepresentative of its intended object.

So much by way of brief general exposition of what I understand to be Professor Royce's line of argument; let us turn now to the examination of that argument.

Passing over the question of the propriety of the author's classifying all the systems of ontology simply with regard to their attitudes towards a single problem in the theory of knowledge, what are we to say of his definition of realism? "According to this conception," says Professor Royce, "to be real means to be independent of an idea or experience through which the real being is, from without, felt, or thought, or known. And this . . . is the view which, recognizing independent beings as real, lays explicit stress upon their independence as the very essence of their reality."¹ Now this definition seems to me to commit the more or less serious error of confusing the *ratio cognoscendi* with the *ratio essendi*. The independence of an object is not what makes it real, it is what makes us aware that it is real. The realist has, let us say, a visual perception of a chair; he wishes to find out whether the chair and its idea are merely two aspects of one fact, as the idealist believes, or whether they are two numerically separate facts, as he himself believes. Casting about for some means to test the question, he chances perhaps to turn away his head or to close his eyes; his visual perception of the chair at once begins to fade. He has various reasons for believing that what he calls the real chair is not fading, and as he cannot conceive how what is numerically identical can both fade and not fade at the same time, he is forced to believe that the chair and its idea are not "one fact in two different contexts," but two numerically different facts. The chair has remained independent of the variations in the idea of the chair, and this independence is evidence for regarding the two as separate. The method of procedure for determining whether idea and object are numerically separate, is, in fact, just the same as that for determining

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

whether any two things are numerically separate. Suppose we wish to find whether a brass rod consists of one piece or of two pieces cleverly laid together so as to resemble one piece. Our natural impulse is of course to vary the position of what we suppose to be one of the pieces. If the other piece remains quite independent of these variations, we know that that independence results from the numerical separateness of the two things. Independence of an object in the face of the numerous variations in its idea is thus an effect of its reality, and not a cause of it—a sign by which we recognize the separateness of object and idea, and not a ground of that separateness. And I have dwelt upon what appears to me to be the obvious *hysteron proteron* involved in Professor Royce's definition because many of the dire consequences which are supposed to befall the realist depend solely upon that definition. This difficulty, however, need not prevent us from following Professor Royce's main argument, for even though 'independence' is not itself the essence of the realistic theory, it is in an inevitable consequence of it, and the realist is accountable for its implications.

The first of the alleged implications of the independence of the real object is what I have called 'externality of relations.' Professor Royce puts the matter thus: ". . . this realistic definition seems to imply . . . that even if your knowledge and its object are facts which when examined, say by a psychologist, appear to him to be causally related, or which when externally observed seem to agree, still any such linkage where it exists is no part of the essential nature, *i. e.*, of the mere definition either of your object in so far as it is real, or of your knowledge in so far as it consists of mere ideas . . . Realism asserts that existent causal or other linkage between any knower and what he knows is no part of the definition of the object known, or of its real being, or of the essence of the knowing idea, if viewed in itself alone, as a 'mere idea.'"¹

Before inquiring into the justice of this argument, let us consider the meaning of "a relation external to the terms related." A relation apart from the terms which it relates, would seem to be in much the same position as a fraction that was external to

¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 115-117.

or independent of its own numerator and denominator, and however many subtle paradoxes the concept of relation may contain, it seems clear that it lies in the essence of that concept to exist only as relative to its terms. A relation without terms, then, is as good as no relation; and to say, for example, that the only kind of causality that is consistent with the realist's definition is a causality that has nothing to do with either cause or effect, is equivalent to saying that the relation of causality is not consistent with that definition. Let us then interpret Professor Royce's 'first implication' as the statement that relations of causality and correspondence are impossible between an idea and its object, if they are independent in the realistic sense. (That this is the true interpretation will become still more apparent when we consider the other alleged implications.) One naturally asks what there is in the realist's notion of an object's independence of its idea that would compel him to give up the thought of their being related. The independence posited by the realist is the independence that, following from numerical separateness, is a sign to us that that separateness exists. And any relation that is consistent with numerical separateness will be consistent with whatever independence is implied by that separateness. Now because two peas are numerically separate, and to that extent independent, they are not thereby precluded from causing changes in one another, nor from corresponding to one another. In fact, the only reason, so far as I can see, that could have led the author to assert the incompatibility of realistic independence and the existence of relations is what I have already referred to as the apparent failure to see that realistic independence is simply the result of numerical separateness, and that as such it is limited in its degree, and is by no means so absolute as to make all relations 'external' or non-existent.

This brings us, however, to the second of the alleged implications of the realistic definition. Professor Royce here tells us explicitly that realistic independence must be absolute. He says: "In the second place, however, realism taken in its unmodified form, asserts that the independence here in question . . . is indeed in its own realm absolute. For it is the whole Being of the ob-

ject, spatial, temporal, inner, and outer, that is independent of the fact that anybody knows this truth.”¹

The author then goes on to explain that when he says that the object must be conceived by the realist as *absolutely* independent of the idea, he means that independence at one moment logically implies independence for all time, and under all conceivable circumstances. Because we believe that a real object, such as a chair, is not *always* dependent upon every fluctuation of the ideas or states of consciousness by which we are aware of it, our critic would have us admit that the chair can *never* be changed in any way by our ideas concerning it. Of course the realist's answer to such an argument is to point to any two objects, which, though possessing the independence due to numerical separateness, are none the less capable of influencing one another. A mine and a fuse, for instance, have all the independence demanded by the realist for his idea and object, and yet we feel no difficulty in admitting that their independent existence or separateness is no bar to their complete interaction under appropriate conditions. Indeed, the lack of connection between a 'state of separateness' (with the degree and kind of independence therein implied), and a 'state of perpetual inability to interact,' is so glaringly obvious that one might be pardoned for failing altogether to comprehend the author's idea in identifying them.

But let us turn to the 'third implication' of the realist's definition of the relation of object and idea. "Moreover, the essential independence of object and 'mere idea,' in so far as each is first viewed by itself alone, will have to be a mutual independence. The idea will have to be in its own separate essence independent of the object." ² Now there are two considerations which appear to lend color to Professor Royce's thesis of mutuality or reciprocity. In the first place, numerical difference is in itself a reciprocal relation, and the idea and its object stand in this relation. In the second place, the independence which each enjoys can only be overcome by the medium of self. Here, however, the reciprocity ends. The manner in which the self's ideas influence

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 117.

² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

their objects, and the degree of that influence, is different from the manner and degree of the objects' influence upon their ideas. As evidence of this non-mutuality, consider the case of an idea or belief existing in a mind which from blindness or inability refuses to put its judgments to an objective test. Under these conditions it is indeed true that the idea is as independent of its object as its object is of it. But this continued independence is not due to the numerical separateness of the idea, nor to an intrinsic power of resisting change at the hands of its object ; it is due simply and solely to the artificial protection which it receives from a truth-hating self, or from the inaccessibility of its object. Once let these barriers be removed so that the object can confront its idea in the bright light of immediate experience—then indeed the naturally dependent and derivative nature of the 'mere idea' no longer remains in doubt. If false, it is at once extinguished—pushed out of existence by the true perception ; if true, it continues to exist, but only on sufferance, subservient to the slightest observable change in its object. The inverse of this relation is however, quite different. The object, as we have seen, is independent of the idea *qua* idea which any one may have of it, such dependence as there is being due only to the active power of the self to express its ideas in the world. In short, a self or other artificial aid is needed to restrain the object from influencing its idea, while on the other hand the same help is required to enable the idea to influence its object. And although the idea is not always directly caused by its object (more often being caused by other ideas which are the effects of something connected with, or similar to, the object), yet the relation of object and idea, so far as absence of reciprocity is concerned, is practically that of causality. And an effect is only indirectly independent of its cause when removed from its spatial or temporal environment, or when protected by some counteracting cause, while the cause is only dependent upon its effect when reacted upon by the object in which, as its 'state,' the effect was produced.

As for the additional consideration adduced by Professor Royce in support of "mutuality of independence," I have not mentioned it before because it seemed to me to weaken rather

than strengthen his case. Probably, however, I have misunderstood it, hence I give it now in full. "The idea will have to be in its own separate essence independent of the object. Otherwise by merely examining the idea taken by itself, you could prove something about the existence of its object. But if so then the *that* would follow from the *what*, and the independent existence of a thing from the presence of some mere idea of the thing. That, however, is forbidden by the whole spirit of realism."¹

I say that I feel that I have probably misunderstood the meaning of this passage, for as I read it it appears to me to be a second and far more aggravated case of the confusion of the 'reason of knowing' with the 'reason of being.' To say that you cannot *infer* the existence of a cause from the perception of its effect without thereby *making* the existence of a thing follow from the presence of its mere idea, is tantamount to saying that if you see a man in the distance with a peculiar kind of hat worn only by Smith, you cannot thereupon draw the inference that the man is Smith unless you are willing to admit that *your perception of Smith's hat is the cause of Smith's existence*. Is there any one at all, be he realist or synthetic idealist, who would seriously maintain in some similar concrete case that an inference from the perception of an effect to a belief in the existence of its cause, would be impossible except under the monstrous condition that we believed that our perception or idea of the effect had created the cause? But it is surely not necessary to say that when inferences are drawn in a realistic world (or, so far as I can see, in any conceivable world), it is not the *that* which follows from the *what*, or the cause from the effect, but the *knowledge of* the cause that follows from the *knowledge of* the effect—the conception of or belief in the *that* which follows from the perception of the *what*.

"But the definition is now complete. Let us at once set it to work. It has defined a world, let us enter that world and see what is there."² With these words Professor Royce passes from the first part of his argument to the second. From a consideration of the *implications of the realistic definition*, he proceeds to a

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 119.

² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

study of the *consequences of applying that definition to the world of facts*. And we are first to ask the formal question: "In the realistic world whose Being is thus defined, could there exist Many different beings? And if they existed, in what relation would they stand? Or again, could a realistic world contain One sole Being to the exclusion of many beings?"¹

The realist is supposed, for the sake of argument, to begin by taking the pluralistic horn of the dilemma. His world is composed of many real beings. Moreover, he is not to be compelled to say whether his real beings are simple, as were the 'reals' of Herbart, or complex as were the 'monads' of Leibniz. Realistic pluralism in general, and not any particular type of realistic pluralism, is all he need be concerned to defend. Naturally the realist turns first to the world of experience to find examples of his independent beings. He takes the drops of water in the ocean, and the wood of his writing desk, or Laplanders and Bostonians, or any pair of things that seem at first sight to be mutually independent. And then he goes on to show how experience, in addition to furnishing instances of independent objects, also gives examples of the manner in which those objects can enter into very intimate relationship. How, in short, his independent metaphysical realities can give rise to the interdependent world of phenomenal appearance, thereby demonstrating the adequacy of his pluralistic hypothesis to explain things. But Professor Royce has no sooner stated this argument in behalf of the realist than he rejects it. He reminds us that the facts cited by the realist in support of his theory are themselves inconsistent with that theory. For the Bostonians and Laplanders could not become future business correspondents, ocean water could not in the future, when transmuted into rain, warp the wood of the writing desk, unless they had been in the past dependent upon, and not, as the realist would hold, independent of one another. To put the matter in general terms, we may say that no two objects could exist in the same world of time and space without thereby being mutually dependent in a sense that is barred out by the realistic theory. Thus it is that the realist in his search

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 121.

for "many independent beings" is driven out of the world of actually experienced objects into the world of the supersensuous.

Now the force of our author's refutation of the realist's claim to take his independent beings from the world of experience depends solely and confessedly on the thesis advanced in connection with the 'second implication,' the thesis, namely, that the independence asserted by realism is an absolute independence, applying not merely to any one period of time but to the entire past and future possible and actual history of the object and its idea. And, in discussing that second implication, we saw that it was only a 'temporary' independence, *i. e.*, only such independence as would be the inevitable accompaniment of the numerical non-identity of an object and its idea, that is asserted by the realist. In fact, if we call this illegitimate type of independence which applies to any possible past and future history—'hyper-independence,' we may fairly say that Professor Royce's entire refutation of realism is based on his theory that there can be no independence in a realist's world except *hyper-independence*. No realist would admit this theory as true—no realist would deny that a view which accepted hyper-independence would be self-contradictory.

But to return; we had left the realist at the point where his failure to find hyper-independence in the world of experience had condemned him to abandon that world and with it his hope of a comfortable empiricism. "Unhampered, therefore, by empirical guidance we turn back to the chill realm of the hypothetical many beings of our realist's hypothesis . . . And hereupon, assuming the real world now before us to contain many mutually independent beings, I will prove at once two theses: (1) The many different real beings once thus defined can never come to acquire or later to be conceived as possessing any possible real linkages or connections binding these different beings together, and so these different beings will remain forever wholly sundered as if in different worlds. (2) The many real beings thus defined can have no common character; they are wholly different from one another. Only nominally can any common characters be asserted of them." ¹

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 127.

Now the first of these theses is contained in Professor Royce's definition of independence ; and its proof consists practically in a repetition of that definition, and of the grounds for assuming it. If the independence of two objects means a hyper-independence that precludes all future connections between them, then it will certainly be easy to prove that future connections are precluded. And as no new reasons, so far as I can see, are advanced to show that the realist's temporary independence logically implies hyper-independence, I pass at once to the second thesis.

The many real beings can have no common characters. " For suppose that they are first said to possess in common a quality Q . Then let one of the two beings be destroyed. . . . Q , then, the quality supposed to be the same in both beings survives unchanged in the being that does not vanish." (Certainly, for a universal quality is not as a quality affected in the slightest by the fact that there is one less particular object that exemplifies it.) " But now if one man survived a shipwreck in which another was drowned, could you then call the survivor the same as the drowned man? But by hypothesis the quality Q , together with all relationships essential unto its reality survives unchanged in the being that remains, while what is called the same quality in the other being has passed away."¹ But not at all! There was no question of the *quality* "passing away," it was the object that "had" the quality that passed away. No quality has ever been shipwrecked and drowned. A quality could not be drowned any more than it could be chopped. It is not so constituted. Nor has the realist any need of the loop-hole from which he is warned in the next lines by Professor Royce as follows : " But our realist, unwilling to concede this last consequence, may hereupon say that what he meant was that the quality Q in the two beings was partly the same and partly not the same." The realist did not mean this, however ; he meant just what Professor Royce would have him mean, viz., that the two objects had exactly the same quality, and that this qualitative similarity had absolutely nothing to do with the dynamical independence (or lack of independence) in the two bodies. To confuse qualitative

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

similarity or dissimilarity with numerical identity or non-identity is sufficient to destroy all thinking. Professor Royce certainly would not neglect this distinction himself. Why does he make the poor realist neglect it? What is there in the realist's theory of independent beings, even if that independence were extended to the past and future, that justifies our author in inflicting upon him the burdens of Mediaeval nominalism? The realist, by Professor Royce's own account, asserts 'numerical' or 'quantitative' or 'substantial' non-identity, and the independence therein implied, between the object, and the idea of the object. That is his thesis. Now I ask again, What is the nature of the step from the numerical separateness of object and idea to the qualitative dissimilarity of object and idea? Indeed it is not a step, it is a sheer leap. Professor Royce does not think that two peas are any nearer to being one pea if both are green than if one were green and one red. Neither does the realist. Why should he?

Of course this assertion of the total qualitative dissimilarity of the realist's many real beings is the finishing stroke that is necessary to destroy what little plausibility they might have retained after their complete independence in space and time had been assumed. And the realist now turns in desperation from the pluralistic world to the world of monism. "There are indeed not many real beings, but only One Being indefinitely rich in its own nature." But here the realist, just as he is entering this port of refuge, is debarred by the fact that in this single interdependent system there are at least two absolutely independent real beings, viz., the object and its idea, for at least this much of plurality is postulated by the mere definition of realism. But plurality of any sort in connection with beings of the realistic type has already proved to be fatal. Hence this last consequence completes the refutation of realism.

And now by way of conclusion let us note again the essentially defensive attitude of the realist. The idealist has discovered a difficulty in the ordinary view of the nature of knowledge—the difficulty of imagining how the mind can conceive of things which are not inside it. A sort of 'action at a distance' would seem to be involved in the common-sense dualism, and hence the

idealist proposes as a substitute for that dualism the theory that all so-called real objects are, in so far as they are objects of knowledge, inside the mind of the knower; the common-sense notion of a numerical difference of object and 'mere idea' being thus replaced by a difference of relational context. The realist on his side fully admits the genuineness of the difficulty discovered by the idealist, but he cannot bring himself to accept the latter's solution—the remedy seems worse than the disease. In short, he prefers to admit his ignorance of the nature of the relation between idea and object, and the manner in which two such disparate things can interact and correspond, rather than to admit that they are but the same thing seen under two different aspects. When asked to justify his rejection of idealism he replies by an appeal to what is given in experience, to the fact, namely, that the variations of object and idea are seen to be independent of one another under certain conditions. If the object and idea were numerically identical, this independence of variation would be an all but impossible consequence; if they were numerically separate, it would be all but necessary. Hence he concludes that they, the object and its idea, are two numerically separate facts. This is, I take it, the theory of realism. Independence of behavior is not the realistic doctrine; it is the experiential basis for that doctrine. And in spite of the novelty and interest that attaches to Professor Royce's argument, it appears to me to be lacking in finality, just because the author, mistaking this experiential evidence of realism for realism itself, attempts to force upon the realist the strange conclusion that such independence as is implied by and indicative of the numerical separateness of object and idea carries with it a total inability of these two to interact, or to correspond, or to be in any way related.

W. P. MONTAGUE.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA.