

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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INTELLECT: MIND OVER MATTER

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PART II SERIOUS MISTAKES

CHAPTER EIGHT:
ABOUT WHAT EXISTS INDEPENDENTLY OF THE MIND

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What is non-mind in the universe—that which lies totally outside the mind and would exist if the universe contained no minds and would be exactly the same in character whether or not thinking and knowing existed?

What shall we call the totality of existence that is external to the mind? The obvious name for it is reality but, as we shall see, to call it that requires a number of cautionary qualifications.

Are we considering mind in general, any and all minds, or are we considering your mind and mine? Only if we are considering mind in general does the word “reality” signify everything in existence that is non-mind. But if I am considering my own mind, then what is external to it includes your mind, all other human minds, the minds of animals, and possibly the mind of God.

For you as for me, whatever other minds there are belong to the realm of real existences—things whose existence does not depend upon the existence of my mind or upon its operations. My mind is part of reality for you, as your mind is part of reality for me.

What is external to my mind not only includes other minds but also my body. That certainly is the case if there is truth in the view advanced in chapter 4 that the intellectual human mind cannot be reductively identified with the brain as an organ of the human body. But even in the extreme materialist view that identifies the actions of the mind with the actions of the brain, it still remains a fact that the activities of all organs or components of the body that are not operations of the brain and nervous system belong to reality—the realm that is not mind.

Two criteria enter into the definition of the realm that can properly be called reality. One is its existence independent of the human mind in general. The cosmos that physical science describes as beginning its present career, not its creation, with the big bang fifteen or eighteen billion years ago, or this planet in our solar system to which scientists attribute an antiquity that long antedates the first appearance of the human species, fulfills this first criterion.

To deny that the cosmos or this planet is independent of the human mind, which claims to have verifiable knowledge of it, is to deny that claim; for if the existence of the cosmos and this earth were dependent on the existence of the human mind, then the great antiquity that scientists attribute to them must be false. If their existence is dependent on the human mind, then their age is no greater than that of the species *Homo sapiens*.

The second criterion is independence in structure and character as well as in existence. Reality is not only that which exists whether we are present to think about it or not; it is also that which is determinately whatever it is—has the structure and character that it has—no matter how we think about it. Our thinking about it, our efforts to attain knowledge of it, has no constitutive effect upon it, Quantum mechanics, in which we attempt to measure the position and velocity of subatomic particles, would appear to be an exception to this statement. I will return to this point later in a note appended at the end of this chapter.

The appearance of the species *Homo sapiens* on earth added to the constituents of the reality that preexisted man's origin, but that addition did not change the character of any of the other components of reality. They did, indeed, become objects of human knowledge, which they were not before man the knower came into existence,, Becoming an object of knowledge does not change the character of that which is known. If it did, knowledge would be impossible. For us to know something, the character it has as *knowable* must be the character it has *as known*.

The realm of mind includes much that does not belong to the realm of real existence as defined by the two criteria we have just considered. For each of us it includes, first of all, everything we properly regard as subjective, as something each of us experiences that is entirely private and open to inspection by no one else: all of our bodily feelings, our aches and pains, our pleasures, our fear and anger, our desires.

Please note that in the foregoing enumeration of the subjective elements in human experience, I have not mentioned anything that functions cognitively in the minimum sense that it refers to something beyond itself that is its object. Thus, for example, a memory refers to some past event that is its object; a percept refers to some present thing or happening that is its object; a concept refers to something that is an object of thought.

At this point, readers are called upon to remember what was said in chapter 2. Such mental components as memories, percepts, and concepts are not themselves subjectively experienceable by us in the same way that each of us experiences his own bodily feelings, emotions, and desires. Memories, percepts, and concepts exist in our minds solely to perform the function of presenting us with objects remembered, objects perceived, and objects of thought. Through them, we are conscious of their objects, but we are never conscious or aware of them.

Philosophers in the past distinguished between two realms of being, calling one the realm of *entia reale*, and the other the realm of *entia rationis*. The first of these we have already described as that which exists independently of the human mind and has a determinate character that does not depend on how we think about it, the realm of real existence. In sharp contrast, the realm of *entia rationis* consists of those things that have existence only in this individual mind or that one. It consists also of those fictions of thought or conceptual constructs that exist in the minds of scientists or philosophers, as well as the purely subjective elements of our private, personal experience. Their existence is as completely dependent on the existence of my mind or yours as the existence of *entia reale* is totally independent of the existence of my mind or yours, and of the human mind in general.

This twofold division of the realms of being leaves a third realm to be accounted for, one that stands between two extremes. At one extreme, we have the realm the components of which have real existence. At the other extreme, we have the realm the components of which exist only in the mind. The middle ground between these two is occupied by the objects of our perceptions, of our memories, and of our thoughts. While these objects are not independent of the human mind in general, they are independent of one or another individual human mind.

Anything that you and I and other persons can discuss as an object that is common to our experience belongs in this middle realm. Here is the perceived object that you and I are discussing when we hold a bottle of wine in our hands. Here is the remembered occa-

sion you and I are discussing when we talk about a wedding we recently attended. Here is the conceived mathematical infinity that you and I are discussing when we argue about that object of thought.

If there were no perceptions, memories, and conceptions, these commonly perceived, remembered, and thought about objects would not exist. But they do not exist only for my mind or for yours, as my toothache exists only in mine, and your feeling of anger exists only in yours. For example, three persons could have been discussing that perceived bottle of wine, and two of them could continue discussing it if one of them walked away. If I were the one who walked away, that perceived object would not have ceased to exist. Its existence did not depend upon my mind. The same is true of the remembered wedding discussed by three or the mathematical infinity argued about by three. The object being considered would not cease to exist with the disappearance of any one of the three.

There is a reason for complicating the picture by adding this intermediate realm between the real (that which is independent of mind in general) and the subjective (that which is dependent exclusively on my mind or yours). The middle ground, you will remember, is occupied by objects that, while not dependent exclusively on my mind or yours, are dependent for their existence on mind in general and would not exist if there were no human minds at all.

Now we must draw a line that divides these objects into two groups. On the one hand are objects validly perceived or remembered that really exist or that once existed in the past, though they may no longer exist at present. On the other hand are all conceived objects, or objects of thought, that are radically different from perceived and remembered objects.

Unlike the latter, which have real existence as well as objective existence, objects of thought may or may not have real existence in addition to having objective existence. They may be simply *entia rationis*—fictions or constructions of the mind. Does the conceived object really exist is a question we must ask about any object of thought, a question that we may be able to answer affirmatively in some cases and not in others.

That question should never be asked about a validly perceived or remembered object, yet in modern philosophy, and only in modern philosophy, it has been asked persistently. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, no philosopher ever asked for a proof, or anything

like a proof, for the reality of the external world, for the reality of the past, or for the reality of other minds.

There were, of course, skeptics in antiquity, but their skepticism in its most extreme form focused on truth. They asserted that no statement that could be made was either true or false, failing to acknowledge that their own assertion, taken as either true or false, led to self-refutation.

Not until Descartes in the seventeenth century did any philosopher engage in an experiment of doubt that required him to argue for the existence of the external physical world. Doubting the evidence presented by his sense, Descartes took refuge in what appeared to him an undeniable truth. His doubting involved his thinking, and if he was thinking, he could not avoid the conclusion that a thinking being existed.

However, his *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am) did not establish the existence of Descartes, the human individual, body and mind, but only the existence of his intellect, the agency of his doubting and thinking. From that conclusion, he developed a highly questionable argument for the existence of God, a perfect being who, being morally as well as ontologically perfect, would not deceive him. With that conviction established, Descartes declared himself willing to trust his sense-perceptions—of his own body and other bodies—and so finally no longer hesitated to affirm the existence of physical reality, the realm of bodies in motion.

Since Descartes, there have been many other attempts to prove what needs no proof, as well as denials of what cannot be denied—physical reality. To say that its existence is evident to our senses is correct, but that correct statement requires a brief explication.

When you or I say that we *perceive* something—a moving vehicle that we see or hear—we are, in effect, asserting the existence of the perceived object. The statement “I perceive X” is inseparable from the assertion “X exists.” If X did not exist, it would be imperceptible, and the statement “I perceive X” would be false. In its place, there should be a true statement about me—namely, “he is hallucinating X.”

If I am not alone in perceiving X, I can be relatively certain that I am perceiving, not hallucinating, and that X, the perceived object, exists. If I am hallucinating, not perceiving, I will be alone in claiming to perceive X (e.g., a pink elephant in my hospital room). While under the influence of whatever it is that causes my halluci-

nation, I am not likely to be persuaded that it is not there, that I am not perceiving it.

This can be summed up by simply reversing the maxim of Bishop Berkeley's subjective idealism: *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived). The implication that nothing exists unless it is perceptible and also perceived runs counter to facts so obvious that Berkeley's maxim is readily seen to be false. But the reverse is true: *percipi est esse* (whatever is perceived really exists).*

*To affirm the existence of imperceptible conceptual objects, their existence, according to William of Ockham, a medieval philosopher of science, must be needed to explain observed phenomena. The fallacy of reification consists in their affirmation without the need to do so.

As for the reality of the past, a simple inference that any reasonable person would make suffices for its affirmation. I have become acquainted with John Dokes in the present. What I know about human procreation and the succession of generations allows me to believe without hesitation that John Dokes had a father, a grandfather, and a greatgrandfather, and so on back to the prerevolutionary period when his ancestors first came to this country. He may, of course, be telling me fibs about his forebears, but it is at least a reasonable inference from his perceived existence to the conclusion that he had ancestors in a remote past that really existed many years ago and no longer exist today.

Finally, we come to the question about the real existence of minds other than our own. Here, once again, there is no need for subtle arguments or attempts to prove what does not require proof. The simple fact of ordinary conversation between human beings, involving questions and answers about matters of their common experiences, suffices for the conviction that each of them has a human mind, one not essentially different from the other.

If I am one of the two persons and you the other, I hear in what you say evidence that the same kind of mental activity occurring in me is also occurring in you. If I am a third person listening to a conversation between two others, my understanding of the interchanges that I hear imputes to the speakers' mental activity of the same kind that I am experiencing myself.

We noted earlier that there are two criteria, not one, that enter into the definition of a reality external to the human mind and that is genuinely knowable by it. The first is its independent existence. The second is the independence of its structure and character. Neither in its existence nor in its character does reality depend upon the existence of the human mind or upon the activity of the human

mind in its processes of thinking, believing, and knowing. If this were not the case, truth would have a queer meaning, if anything at all deserved to be called truth.

We may think truly or falsely; we may harbor true or false beliefs, but false knowledge is a contradiction in terms. If I claim to know something, my claim-amounts to asserting that I have in my mind the truth about it. I may grasp that truth with certitude or with some shadow of a doubt, but if my claim is false, then I do not have knowledge. Hence, whatever conditions make my assertion true also support my claim to having certain or probable knowledge. Truth and knowledge are inseparable.

In the history of Western thought, there are only two major theories of truth, each with minor variations. One is the correspondence theory of truth; the other, the coherence theory of truth.

The correspondence theory asserts (1) that there is a reality independent of the mind, and (2) that truth (or, what is the same thing, knowledge) exists in the mind when the mind agrees with, conforms or corresponds to, that independent reality. When what I assert agrees with the way things really are, my assertions are true; otherwise they are false.

The correspondence theory of truth includes the coherence theory as a subordinate aspect of itself. If, in my thinking about an independent reality, I make assertions that are inconsistent with one another to the extent that both cannot be true, though both may be false, that incoherence is a sign of some failure in my thinking to correspond with reality. The principle of noncontradiction is both an ontological principle (the principle that contradictories cannot coexist in reality) as well as a logical rule (the rule that thinking cannot be correct if it is self-contradictory).

The conflict between the two theories occurs only when exponents of the coherence criterion of truth deny the correspondence criterion. They claim that *nothing but* perfect coherence in our thought, the absence of all inconsistencies and contradictions, assures us that we have the truth in our mind.

What underlies the denial of the correspondence criterion of truth? Only one thing: the denial of an independent reality that is knowable. Immanuel Kant did not deny a reality independent of the mind, but that reality—*dinge an sich* (things in themselves)—he also declared completely unknowable.

In Kant's view, the realm of objective and public experience that is knowable by us is shaped and determined in its characteristics by the innate structure of the human mind. Accordingly, there is no point in talking about correspondence or agreement between what is in the human mind and what is itself a product of the human mind. Though Kant himself did not appeal to the coherence theory of truth, the absolute idealists in Germany and England, who followed in his wake, did.

In the first decades of this century, there was great agitation in the philosophical journals about the theory of truth. At the center of this controversy were many essays written by the English idealist F. H. Bradley at Oxford and by the American pragmatist William James at Harvard. Bradley attacked James's theory of truth without distinguishing between (1) what for James was a correspondence theory of truth in general and (2) what for James was a pragmatic test whereby we can tell whether a particular thought or proposition is true.

James expounded that pragmatic test as follows. If our thinking leads us to successful results in action (if, in other words, our thinking works out well in practice), we have a hold on truth. Our thinking would fail to work well, it would not lead to a successful result, if it did not correspond with a reality independent of our minds.

He criticized Bradley's coherence theory of truth, not as entirely incorrect but as radically insufficient.* Its insufficiency is attested by the fact that persons in hospitals for the insane, suffering delusions of grandeur or persecution, manage to develop thoroughly coherent and completely consistent accounts to support the delusion that they are Napoleon in exile or the victim of a political conspiracy.

*Bradley mistakenly took the pragmatic test of truth as if it were a definition of what constitutes truth in general. Here is an example of how the pragmatic test works: two men in a canoe floating downstream underestimate the distance of a life threatening cataract. Thinking it four miles farther downstream, when in fact it is only two miles away, they doze off and suffer the disaster that results from their misjudgment. The pragmatic test is not a definition of what constitutes truth in general, but it presupposes that definition in the correspondence theory of truth.

Let us for the moment suppose that the only correct theory of truth is the correspondence theory. Let us consider that theory as including a subordinate criterion of coherence or consistency, and also as supporting the application of the pragmatic test for telling whether a particular thought or statement is in fact true or false. Let us add

to this pragmatic test other empirical tests of verifiability or falsifiability.

Let us further acknowledge that all such tests presuppose the main tenet of the correspondence theory of truth— namely, that the structure and character of reality is independent of the human mind. Finally, let us recognize that the correspondence theory of truth and the pragmatic test for discerning whether something is true or false conform to the commonsense view of the matter.

What shall we say of those modern European thinkers before and after Kant who espouse idealism, or of those contemporary American philosophers who, claiming they are not idealists, nevertheless deny that reality has a structure and character independent of the human mind?

For idealists, there is no reality independent of mind. For those who are not idealists, a reality may exist without dependence on the mind, but its structure and character are not independent of the mind. In either case, must we not say that they have no grounds, or at least no adequate grounds, for testing and affirming truths?

As a consequence, must we not also say that they cannot regard scientific investigation or philosophical inquiry as efforts to attain knowledge of reality? Knowledge of the human mind and of its actions and effects, perhaps; but not knowledge of a reality that is unaffected by the mind's activities.

It may not come as a surprise to some of my readers, especially those who have acquaintance with the history of modern thought, that post-Kantian idealism in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Germany and England dominated the philosophical scene.* But many readers will probably be surprised to learn that there has been quite recently a revival of the idealist error by contemporary philosophers in America.

*Readers may remember from chapter 7 that idealism the opposite of commonsense realism is a peculiarly modern error, both before and after Kant.

They have attributed to the human mind constructive, formative, and creative powers that, in effect, nullify its cognitive power—its power to attain knowledge and to ascertain truths in the light of empirical evidence. This is all the more remarkable in view of the fact that, at the beginning of this century, in its first two decades, philosophers, working in teams, effectively criticized and attempted to refute the then regnant idealism.

In 1912, six philosophers cooperatively produced a book entitled *The New Realism*.^{*} In an appendix, each wrote a summary of his position. Both Professor Edwin Holt and Professor Walter Marvin stressed their common view that objects of knowledge are not conditioned or affected by their being known. “Realism,” wrote Professor William Montague, “is opposed to subjectivism or epistemological idealism, which denies that things can exist apart from an experience of them, or independently of the cognitive relation.” Professor Walter Pitkin reiterated this by saying that “the realist holds that things known are not products of the knowing relation nor essentially dependent for their existence or behavior on that relation.”

^{*}Edwin B. Holt, Walter T. Marvin, William Pepperrell Montague, Ralph Barton Perry, Walter B. Pitkin, and Edward Gleason Spaulding. In England, at about the same time, G. E. Moore wrote an essay entitled “The Refutation of Idealism,” in *Philosophical Studies* (1922).

In 1921, seven philosophers published what they called a cooperative study of the problem of knowledge, entitled *Essays in Critical Realism*.^{*} In that volume, Professor George Santayana’s essay set forth three proofs of realism and concluded with the following statement:

You cannot prove realism to a complete skeptic or idealist, but you can show an honest man that he is not a complete skeptic or idealist, but a realist at heart. So long as he is alive his sincere philosophy must fulfill the assumptions of his life and not destroy them.

^{*}Durant Drake, Arthur O. Lovejoy, James Bissett Pratt, Arthur K. Rogers, George Santayana, Roy Wood Sellars, and C. A. Strong. I call attention especially to pp. 87-97 of the essay by Professor Pratt, in which readers will find a brief and extremely clear account of the philosophical errors in modern thought that, both prior to and after Kant, gave rise to idealism in its many forms.

Not only Santayana but all the rest of the writers in these two volumes repeatedly pointed out the conflict between idealism and common sense. The commonsense view of a reality independent of the mind, which permits the mind to have a cognitive relation to it, is that of realism.

Early in the twentieth century, Jacques Maritain distinguished sharply between (a) empiriometric science, for which the only reality is that which can be measured and for which the measurements made can be fed into powerful mathematical equations, and (b) the metaphysical knowledge of aspects of reality that exist, though they are beyond the possibility of measurement.^{*} He called attention to the fact that the great physicists of the twentieth century,

from Einstein on, allowed themselves to slip from saying “what is not measurable *by* a physicist has no reality *for* a physicist” (which is true) into saying “what is not measurable has no existence in reality” (which is just as plainly false).

*I would like to refer readers to pertinent passages in a book by Maritain, the translation of which I edited: *Scholasticism and Politics* (1940), chapter 11, on science and philosophy, especially pp. 28, 30-34, 37-38. See also his *The Degrees of Knowledge* (1938). Here Maritain espouses the critical realism of Aristotle and Aquinas, a realism that antedates by many centuries the modern forms of idealism. It is not in any way an attempt to refute these modern errors as, for example, is G. E. Moore’s “The Refutation of Idealism,” first published in *Mind* in 1903 and issued in a collection of his essays published in 1922 under the title *Philosophical Studies*. More recently, the Gifford Lectures in 1974-76 by Stanley Jaki, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God*, contain another refutation of idealism. See chapter 9, “The Illusions of Idealism.”

Forty and fifty years later, after the publication in 1962 of Thomas K. Kuhn’s book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, natural scientists and philosophers of science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton argued with one another about whether science was making progress in getting at the truth about reality.

Were not successive scientific hypotheses or theories like different pairs of glasses having different tints through which nature might be viewed, each an alternative view of the way things are? Did we have grounds for being assured that, in this succession of regnant theories, science was getting nearer and nearer to the ultimate truth about the cosmos?

Professor Kuhn raised the question whether it really helps to imagine that there is one full, objective, true account of nature and that the proper measure of scientific achievement is the extent to which it brings us nearer to that ultimate goal. Kuhn doubted it, but another philosopher of science, Dudley Shapero, who came to the Institute for Advanced Study in the late 1970s, disagreed with Kuhn. He denied that seeing through glasses of one or another tint makes a true understanding of nature impossible. The glasses we wear may color our view of reality, but surely they do not constitute its structure or character. In a review of Kuhn’s book, Shapero described it as “a sustained attack on the prevailing image of scientific change as a linear process of ever-increasing knowledge.”

Even more recently, contemporary American philosophers and psychologists, such as Nelson Goodman, Jerome Bruner, and Richard Rorty, have published books that revive the Kantian retreat from an independent reality and give us a new form of idealism that Professor Bruner calls a “constructivist philosophy.”*

*Professor Bruner's book is entitled *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (1986). Professor Goodman wrote *Ways of World Making* (1978) as well as *Of Mind and Other Matters* (1984); Professor Rorty's book is *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979).

In his review of Goodman's *Of Mind and Other Matters*, Bruner makes clear that constructivism, "contrary to common sense," holds that "there is no unique 'real world' that preexists and is independent of human mental activity." Subsequently in the review, Bruner explains that "the constructivist view that what exists is a product of what is thought, was first worked out by Kant." But unlike Kant, "Goodman refuses to assign any privileged status or any 'ultimate reality to any particular world that we may create.'" "And "once we give up the idea of an aboriginal reality," Bruner writes, "we lose the criterion of correspondence between statement or hypothesis and 'reality' as a way of distinguishing between true and false models of the world."*

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