The Uneasy Union of Reality and Pragmatism in Inquiry

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1. Idealization as a unifying principle

Idealization provides the key to understanding various fundamental philosophical relationships. Granted, an ideal is something "unrealistic," something that is not actually realizable and attainable. It looks to a completion and perfection that is not to be achieved under the difficult conditions of an obstreperous reality. Nevertheless, it is an eminently useful resource because it serves as a constant reminder that what we actually have is imperfect and improvable, and thereby offers us a constant challenge to endeavor to improve on what we actually have. Moreover—and this is the presently crucial point—idealization provides for us a conceptual instrument by whose means some key philosophical ideas can be explained and relationships understood.

To see this idea at work, consider some of the traditional philosophical contrasts and dichotomies:

—appearance / reality
—phenomena / actuality
—what seems / what is
—what we think / what actually is
—belief / fact.

Here we appear to be confronting opposites that glower at one another across a gulf of seemingly unsurmountable differentiation, confronting philosophers with a seemingly insuperable barrier. To all appearances there is just no way of getting there from here.

But idealization comes to the rescue by affording a convenient means of building a bridge across this seemingly impassible barrier and effecting a viable connection between its seemingly opposed contrasts.

The key idea is conveyed by the following instances:

—Reality is not disconnected from appearance: it just exactly is what would appear in ideal conditions.

—Fact is not disconnected from belief: it just exactly is what belief would be in ideal conditions

—What is is not disconnected from what seems: it is what could seem to be so in ideal conditions.

On such an approach, there is thus no total disconnection of ontology and epistemology. Somewhat ironically, the key to reality is afforded by idealization. Matters in reality are just what inquiry would indicate them to be in ideal conditions. Ontology is idealized epistemology. Reality just is what it

reveals itself to be in ideal circumstances, where revelation is of course not alone but encompasses *conceptualization* as well. Such an approach averts the Kantian gulf between a realm of appearances and actualities as such. Those notorious "things in themselves" are now simply things as they would appear in idealized conditions of observation and conceptualization. The things that are reality's actual furnishings are in principle self-revealing, albeit only under ideal conditions.

2. Why ideals are unrealistic: Desideratum complementarity

The problem with idealizations is of course that they are not effectively realizable as such. And there is a deep rooted and compelling reason for this. For we confront the phenomenon of what might be called *desideratum complementarity*.

It lies in the nature of things that their desirable features are in general competitively interactive. A conflict or competition among desiderata is an unavoidable fact of life, seeing that since positivities cannot all be enhanced at once since more of the one can only be realized at the expense of less of the other. All too often parameters of merit are linked (be it through a nature-imposed or a conceptually mandated interrelationship) in a see-saw or teeter-totter interconnection where more of the one automatically ensures less of the other.

Situations of trade-off along these general lines occur in a wide variety of contexts, and many parameters of merit afford instances of this phenomenon. Thus as the medieval knight-in-armor soon learnt to his chagrin, *safety* and *mobility* are locked into a conjunction-resistant conflict when it comes to dealing with his armor. And automobile manufacturers of the present confront pretty much the same problem. Or consider homely situation of a domestic garden. On the one hand we want the garden of a house to be extensive—to provide privacy, attractive vistas, scope for diverse planting, and so on. But on the other had we also want the garden to be small—affordable to install, convenient to manage, affordable to maintain. But of course we can't have it both ways: the garden cannot be *both* large *and* small. The desiderata at issue are locked into a see-saw of conflict.

Overall, desideratum complementarity is pretty well inevitable with any complex, multidimensional good whose overall merit hinges on the cooperation of several distinct value-components. In all such cases we have a teeter-totter, see-saw relationship of the general sort here characterized as desideratum complementarity. Beyond a certain point, augmentations of the one are simply *incompossible* with augmentations of the other (to use Leibniz's terminology). There is always a trade-off curve that characterizes the

decrease in one parameter of value that is the unavoidably exacted price for an increase in the other.

3. The inevitability of compromises in inquiry

The situation complementarity is also encountered in the context of inquiry. With higher standards of acceptability we plunge into errors of omission. With lower standards we plunge into error of commission—and even inconsistency. And yet we cannot have it both ways but must settle for an imperfect compromise. Such clashes occur also in matter of inquiry and cognition. The classic illustrations are

—security / definiteness
—reliability / detail
—vulnerability / informativeness.

And these conflicts are present both at the local level of individual theses and contributions and at the global level of theories and systems. Here, with respect to cognitive engineering, the situation is analogous with that of physical engineering.

In physical engineering we overdesign. We prepare for worst-case scenarios. We indulge an excess of caution. For what can be seen as ***realistic*** worries. The more complex and ambitious the overall mechanism (physical or cognitive system) the more vulnerable it becomes to the prospect of a system failure. With cognitive as with physical systems the less we ask of them by way of sophistication and ambitiousness of operation the further we reduce the prospect of malfunction. And yet we pay a substantial price.

What do we do when the things we accept on rationally cogent ground prove to be collectively inconsistent? We launch into damage control. We seek out the weakest link within the context of discussion. We do what investors do when market conditions turn difficult—we opt for safety.

Yet we do not—cannot provide for absolute security against everything, however fanciful, unrealistic and hyperbolic. Nor can we do this in cognitive engineering. We cannot protect ourselves against Descartes' all-powerful evil deceiver nor against the sceptic for whom all life is but a dream. There are no defenses against unrealism—save by stressing its very nature. We have to worry about the possibilities of failure already, but we must do so in the face of the realization that they come at very different levels: ***hyperbolically imaginable failings*** overlap ***barely conceivable failings***, that overlap ***reasonable failings***, overlapping themselves ***likely failings***.

In realistic cognitive management we enlarge the domain of worriment only as far as we need to in order to merit the realities of the situation. We calculate the trade-off costs and benefits: ignorance and unknowing as again incorrectness and error.

The whole process is an exercise and in theoretical reasoning on the basis of abstract general principles but of practical sagacity in the management of resources.

4. From idealization to pragmatic and conceptual optimization

In the management of information we deploy certain rules and regulations. For—to reemphasize—information management is cognitive engineering. It is, in the first analysis, a process that is structurally and fundamentally not altogether different from bricklaying or plastering. And in actual practice this calls for a negotiation between the (obtainable) realities of the situation and the (unachievable) idealities that prevail in the domain.

In matters of knowledge as in matters of politics, "pragmatism" is in a position based on compromise and accommodation—of adjustment (perhaps with reluctance and regret) to the aft-unwelcome reality of things. It is a position of sub-idealization, of rational resignation. Its rationale lies in their idea that because it is in-principle impossible for us to have things be as we would ideally like we have to do the best that is practicable in the circumstances.

And these circumstances have to be understood as being defined not by the unrealizable idealities of the matter but rather by the prevailing conditions of the existing situation at hand. It is—as pragmatism sees it—the purposive fabric of the situation that is the arbiter of the adequacy of our problem-resolutions—even within the domain of inquiry and cognition.

The questions we confront always arise in circumstances where there is something or other that we expect that answer to do for us—some purpose it is expected to serve. Perhaps this is only "Allaying our uncertainty"—removing our ignorance and unknowing. Here nothing narrowly practical is at stake but purpose is still upon the scene. Afford to set very high standards. But delaying a decision forever is not practicable.

Desideratum complementarity is an ineliminable feature of the real. The world's furnishings are inevitably such that any merit of a thing is a complex that disassembles into a plurality of subordinate merits each one of which conflicts with some of the rest. And this means that perfection—now understood as maximal merit in every evaluation-relevant respect is something that is in principle impossible of realization. (Structures can have the merit of being livable and enduring, but each will defeat the other. Pyramids endure, but are fit only for the dead; cabins are livable, but subject to decay.)

Desideratum complementarity has the consequence that to envision an ideal that optimizes matters in every desirable direction is to suspend realism

and take flight in pure fancy. In matters of enhancing merit an advance in one direction involves retreat in another.

To optimize we must compromise—strive for the best achievable balance of merits. But here we at once come face to face with the question: Best for what? For there just is no absolute best—or "best for everything all-at-once."

Optimization is unavoidably contextual, uneliminably purpose conditioned. Optimization, in sum, is a ***pragmatic*** (i.e., purpose-coordinated) concept. There just is no purposively context-free, all-in, best no absolute or categorical optimization.

And just here lies the unavoidability of pragmatism even in "purely theoretical" matters of inquiry and value alike. And in the end the ironic fact remains that even in matter of theoria—of rational inquiry and cognitive development—considerations of ***praxis***, of purpose-contextuality must be determinative for of our theorizing.

Notes

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