

THE JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY

PSYCHOLOGY AND SCIENTIFIC METHOD

REALISM VERSUS EPISTEMOLOGICAL MONISM

“*Um eine Wahrheit richtig kennen zu lernen,*” says Novalis, “*muss man sie auch polemisiert haben.*” It will, therefore, I hope, be regarded as evidence merely of a desire to appreciate to the full all the truth there is in the “new realism,” if I present a few remarks upon the reasonings recently published in these columns by Professor Perry, in his friendly, amusing, and vigorous reply to his critics.¹ So far as the reply deals with minor matters and controverts certain criticisms upon his method of procedure in his “Present Philosophical Tendencies” he ought, in fairness, I think, to have the last word. But upon the main philosophical question with which he deals, his paper seems to me to show the needfulness of some further attempt at clarification; and, in particular, to show the desirability of an attempt to establish more clearly than I seem hitherto to have succeeded in doing, what the main question and the right logical order of questions in the controversy over neo-realism are.

It is evident in his reply that Professor Perry’s attention is not chiefly directed upon the side of the neo-realistic shield on which I had ventured to animadvert. His interest seems, indeed, to be so largely absorbed by one issue that he is prevented from observing that I have been mainly dealing with another, and have been urging that it is the logically prior one. The philosophy of the neo-realistic sextet—to distinguish it thus from Professor Fullerton’s and other kinds of “new” realism—contains, as we have repeatedly been told by the authors of it, two equally essential doctrines, *viz.*, realism as such and “epistemological monism,” the “theory of the independence” of the object of cognition and the theory of its “immanence” or “numerical identity” with the actual content of consciousness. And the second of these two theories, as we have likewise been authoritatively given to understand, is but a corollary of a still more fundamental doctrine, the “relational theory of consciousness.”

¹ This JOURNAL, Vol. X., pages 449–463.

This last, indeed, affords a great part of the support for the "theory of independence" as well as for the "theory of immanence." The great neo-realistic discovery has professedly been a discovery about the nature and function—or functionlessness—of consciousness in cognition; the most pregnant thesis of the new philosophy, as I have elsewhere remarked, is the thesis "that consciousness is known to be the sort of thing that can not possibly be constitutive of the existence or the nature of any object." Now, this is not only the most original and most decisive element in the new realism, but also its most significant element. The contention that consciousness is a purely "external" relation, and the epistemological monism which is implied by this contention, are the things in the theory which go deepest and cut the widest swath in philosophy. Nearly all, though not quite all, that I have hitherto written on the doctrine has been concerned with this part of it, has dealt with the special question: Is a *monistic* realism possible (a) without self-contradiction, and (b) without contradiction of conceded facts and distinctions, and, in general, (c) without a denial of the possibility of perceptual error?

Now, it seems difficult to persuade Professor Perry to take a serious interest in this aspect of the doctrine which he professes. The "theory of independence" is evidently with him the more highly favored child. About realism as such, and the inadequacy of the usual arguments against it, he argues much and forcefully in his recent article; about epistemological monism he has something, but disappointingly little, to say directly. And most of the part of his paper which is a rejoinder to certain arguments of mine curiously connects those arguments with the wrong conclusion! Professor Perry, for example, observes that he sees nothing in "the argument for the subjectivity of the aberrations of sense-perception" which can determine "the comparative merits of realism and idealism." And of course, where the question concerns merely idealism and realism *überhaupt*, there isn't anything in that argument which bears upon the question. I have never imagined that there is; nor can I recall ever intimating such a thing. But there seems to me to be a very plain pertinency of that argument to the question of the merits of monistic realism. Again, Professor Perry remarks that I "for some reason" find something "inconsistent with realistic premises"² in his admission that "knowledge and the thing known" may often "possess little if any identical content." But what I had said about this admission was, as a matter of fact, that I could not "recognize in it the authentic accent of epistemological monism." In short, Perry's engrossment in the defense of realism in general is

² The passage of mine which Perry cites occurs in my review of his "Tendencies," this JOURNAL, Vol. IX., page 681.

such that he overlooks the most express insistence that one is not dealing with that part, but with the other part, of the neo-realistic scheme.

Upon this other part, however, I must try once more to fix his attention and that of any who may be interested in the general issue. I shall not, indeed, here again set forth at length the arguments which I have already repeated to weariness. But I shall make a few comments upon such passages in Professor Perry's paper as seem to bear in any way upon this matter, and shall endeavor to indicate more definitely than hitherto how this issue and that concerning realism as such seem to me to be related.

1. The principal objection which I, at least, have brought against epistemological monism when conjoined with realism, consists in the observation that there are certain classes of perceptual data—hallucinations and “secondary qualities,” for example—which we are compelled, if we would avoid absurdity, to regard as existing merely subjectively; and that, therefore, consciousness can not *as such, and in all cases*, be merely an external or “non-constitutive” relation, nor can *all* of its objects be wholly independent of it. To this mode of argument Professor Perry now makes a reply which would doubtless be fatal if it were itself well grounded. He contends, namely, that the notion of “merely subjective existence,” employed in the argument is evasive and meaningless. “So long as ‘subject’ is not itself scientifically formulated,” he declares, the notion in question serves merely as “the back yard in which the sweepings or the original disorder of experience are kept out of sight without being wholly denied. In this sense ‘merely subjective’ means ‘not yet explained.’” But I must protest that to me, and I suppose to most people, it means nothing of the sort; that, on the contrary, the expression has a perfectly definite sense, which can be sufficiently, though perhaps not exhaustively, formulated; and that Professor Perry manifestly uses the same notion constantly and could not philosophize in the lack of it. No occult and elusive metaphysical assumptions about the nature of “the subject” are essential to its definition. Any thing or quality or relation is said to exist “merely subjectively,” or “in appearance only,” when it exists at any given time in the “consciousness-relation” with respect to one or to some limited number of conscious centers (or organisms, if Professor Perry prefers the word), and does not at that time exist outside of that particular relation or independently of it. In the case of those things which appear in consciousness as having extension and the qualities of physical objects, the negative part of this definition can be put more concretely. Such things are said to exist merely subjectively, if they do not exist in the one space common to the generality of per-

ipients at the points at which they appear as existing, and if they do not belong to the dynamic system of physical nature. All the elements of this definition are the common currency of neo-realistic speech and thought. These writers distinguish the "consciousness-relation" from other relations, and therefore presumably mean something definite by it; they recognize that things are in that relation always with reference to individual organisms or minds; and they regard "independence" as a definite and positive predicate, and therefore should be capable of understanding what one means by saying that certain things or relations are *not* independent of the consciousness-relation. It can not, then, be on the ground that the very notion of "merely subjective existence" is to them unintelligible, that neo-realists can disregard the difficulties inherent in their epistemological monism. They may argue that the ascription of this kind of existence lacks proof, or even—reversing the short and easy method of the Berkeleyian idealist—that it is intrinsically insusceptible of proof; but they are not entitled to say that they can not imagine what their critics are talking about.

2. But do they, as a school, maintain that nothing which can be said to exist can depend essentially upon consciousness? Is the assertion that "consciousness is an external relation" meant to apply to all cases, or only to some cases, of even cognitive consciousness? I can not refrain from raising once more the complaint that this peculiarly well-organized philosophic party has failed to make this point clear in its platform. No one can read "The New Realism" with this question in mind without being convinced that the question has not in all cases been fairly faced, and that, so far as it has been faced, different members of the group give opposing answers to it. Now, to speak frankly, I can not think it exemplary procedure, on the part of any school of philosophers, that they should announce as the fundamental tenet of their common creed a proposition, concerning which it subsequently transpires that they are not clear, or at least have no common understanding, as to whether it is a universal or a particular proposition.

Professor Perry's personal view, however, seems scarcely mistakable. Alike in his "Present Tendencies," in "The New Realism" and in his recent paper, he makes it evident that he does not accept the relational theory of consciousness as a universal proposition.³ He enumerates a number of elements of our experience which "depend upon consciousness." He admits that "images may be used by the mind as substitutes for certain other things which they are said to 'mean'"⁴—which is to say that images are not in all of

³ Cf. the writer's remarks on this point in *Science*, N. S., XXXVII., page 868.

⁴ This JOURNAL, Vol. X., page 458, note.

their content and relations identical with any simultaneously existing independent object. Even of normal perception he apparently maintains only that "when an entity is object of consciousness it enters into a new relation of which *certain* other relations, *sufficient to determine it*, are independent,"⁵—not, be it observed, *all* its other relations. Thus Professor Perry seems to hold a monistic view of cognition only with respect to some part of the content of consciousness, and even of perception.

Such being his attitude towards the central doctrine of the school to which he professes to belong, I should like to put certain questions concerning the implications of that attitude. It would conduce, I am sure, to a better understanding at least of Professor Perry's personal version of neo-realism, if he would consent to answer these questions explicitly.

i. Is not the difference between one who takes this position and one who—like Professor Pitkin, for example,—declares that *nothing* can ever be in the slightest degree dependent upon consciousness, a very wide and fundamental philosophical difference?⁶

ii. If some of the things which present themselves in "the consciousness-relation" are "dependent on consciousness," by what criterion are we to determine just which are and which are not so dependent? Let it be remarked that it is no proper answer to this question to say vaguely that the criterion is empirical. What we need to know is the *kind* of empirical test which we are to rely upon, and how in specific instances it is to be applied.

iii. What *positive* proofs of *physical* realism (as distinct from proofs of the inconclusiveness of the subjectivist arguments) does the neo-realist use when he gives up the argument for independence which was based upon the supposed generic incapacity of consciousness to be constitutive of anything?

iv. Why, if much of our experience is dependent upon consciousness, may not errors, hallucinations, and the secondary qualities of matter be so dependent? Why should a realist who does not hold the relational theory of consciousness as a universal proposition defend the paradox of the objectivity of the illusory, which was originally simply a troublesome consequence of that theory?

3. Though Professor Perry seems, as we have seen, to adopt epistemological dualism, and to abandon the external-relation theory of consciousness, with respect to a large part of our cognitive experience—and though he also seems to offer no good reason for pausing

⁵ *Op. cit.*, page 463; italics mine.

⁶ Not that Pitkin consistently adheres to this (*cf. Philos. Rev.*, XXII., page 421). An undeviating epistemological monism is to be found in none of the new realists.

on this path at just the point where he does pause—yet in one passage he presents very briefly an argument which apparently purports to be a refutation of dualism as such. Ordinarily, as he remarks, “secondary qualities have been explained in terms of a relation between a physical environment and a reacting sentient organism”; and this explanation has given rise to the dualism—which Professor Perry strangely calls “the epiphenomenalism”—of popular science, the view that “over and above the organism and the environment there is a series of entities that *are a function of a specific relation of organism and environment.*”⁷ But this dualistic realism is untenable. The objections to it Professor Perry finds it “scarcely necessary to rehearse”; yet he reminds us of “the essential point,” *viz.*, that the dualistic theory “fails to account for knowledge by construing it as a depository of states effected by an outer physical cause which *ex hypothesi* can not itself be known.” In rejecting dualism on this ground, neo-realism is confessedly borrowing a point from “idealism”; both the latter doctrines “are attempts to provide for an immediate knowledge of reality, by identifying reality with objects before the mind.” Concerning the use of this argument against epistemological dualism by the neo-realist three remarks seem to me pertinent.

(a) Professor Perry does not, of course, state quite justly the position of either popular or philosophical dualism, when he represents it as holding that the outer object which produces its psychic counterpart “can not itself be known.” The word “known” in such a context is question-begging. The dualist has always declared that the existence and some of the attributes or relations of the object *can* be known, but only mediately. His characteristic thesis, in short, is that there is such a thing as mediate yet valid knowledge, and that all cognition of objective or independent realities must be of this sort. There are, he maintains, always two entities involved in any genuinely cognitive situation: the “*content* of the knowing experience” (to use Professor Strong’s terminology),⁸ and the “*object*” of that experience. But though these two are by hypothesis existentially distinct, they are related in a peculiar manner; and the possibility of this relation is grounded in a peculiarity of the first factor, or “*content.*” Primarily, indeed, and from what may be called the point of view of an outside observer of the situation, the relation between the two entities is simply one of partial correspondence or, at the least, of practical adjustment of content to object. The correspondence may, as dualism has been wont to admit ever since Descartes’s time, be very imperfect. There is, says Professor

⁷ *Op. cit.*, page 460; italics mine.

⁸ “Substitutionalism” in “Essays in Honor of William James,” page 172.

Strong, "a large element of misrepresentation and mere symbolism" on the side of "content"; "the knowing experience may vary markedly from its prototype in richness of detail, in the cast of its qualities, and even in more fundamental ways" without forfeiting its cognitive pretensions, "so long as it calls forth the right reaction." But what the dualist in the first instance asserts is merely that this duplicity of existence accompanied by partial qualitative correspondence, or by functional correlation, is a fact. If, however, you go on to ask him how he can know it to be a fact—since the *knowing* of the relation of content to object must itself lie wholly on the side of content—he will answer by pointing out the peculiarity of the knowing experience. It is, namely,—as he declares—able to include *within* content a "reference" to that which is outside and independent of content; it is capable, in short, of meaning something by the predicate "independent existence"; and it is further capable of finding within the limits of content reasons, either probative or probable, for attaching that predicate to some of the other elements of content, and for thus "projecting" these outside itself. By virtue of this peculiarity of thought, then, the dualist concludes, the external object can be in some measure "known" without being "immediately" given.

(b) Such being the essentials of the dualistic view, one must suppose that it is against this view that Professor Perry intends to direct the objection already cited. When he says that the dualist's external object "can not be known," he must be understood to mean, not that the dualist admits this, but that he ought to admit it, that this is a necessary, though unacknowledged, implication of his doctrine. But why should the unknowableness of the real object be held to be an implication of dualism, in view of the reasoning just given, whereby the dualist repudiates this implication? Professor Perry can charge dualism with the difficulty which he imputes to it, only if he rejects the principle which all philosophical adherents of that view regard as rendering the difficulty nugatory—the principle, namely, that there may be a valid mediate knowledge of objects, that the "content" of cognition may "stand for" something not itself and even attest the externality of that something. But in fact, so far from rejecting this principle, Professor Perry has repeatedly affirmed it, and in his recent paper he seems even to treat it as axiomatic: "no philosopher," he thinks, "has been so hardy as to deny that signs, words, symbols, and even images may be used by the mind as substitutes for certain other things which they are said to 'mean.'"⁹ If "used" here is to be understood to signify "legitimately used for cognitive purposes," then the proposition which

⁹ *Op. cit.*, page 458, note.

Professor Perry supposes nobody to have denied is a proposition which robs his objection to dualism of all force. If by means of an "image," I can know of the existence and something of the nature of a thing which is not that image, which is different from it in the time or place or manner of its existence; or again, if "in mediate knowledge or discursive thought" there are, as we are told in "Present Philosophical Tendencies," cases "in which the knowledge and the thing known possess little if any identical content," and yet the knowledge in such cases is genuine and objective; then the only argument which Professor Perry brings against dualism is nullified by his own admissions. If a real mediate knowledge of any single thing whatever is conceded to be possible—for example, a knowledge of my own past experiences, or a general truth arrived at only through inference—then it is conceded that the knowing experience possesses precisely the peculiarity with which the dualist credits it—the capacity to find within the limits of "content" "references" to something existentially, and in part qualitatively, distinct from that content, and a power, or even a compulsion, to regard that something as an existent not less actual than the content itself. But—to repeat the essential point—if the knowing experience has this peculiar potency, it can not be assumed that, in order "to account for knowledge" at all, we must "provide for an *immediate* knowledge of reality, by identifying reality with objects [directly] before the mind."

(c) It is, however, a sound instinct for the implications of his "theory of independence" that has led Professor Perry into this admission of the possibility of valid mediate knowledge, and thereby into a contradiction of his own argument against epistemological dualism. For the truth is that any realist, new or old, if he is to make out his case at all, absolutely requires just that assumption about the self-transcending reference of the cognitive experience which we have seen to be the fundamental principle of dualism. He requires it just as much for his theory about perception as for his theory about discursive thought. For he is committed, *e. g.*, to the assertion that the perceptual object which is at a given moment in the consciousness-relation—"immediately before the mind," the neo-realist would say—is yet independent of that relation, that it can remain the same object without being thus related to my or any other organism. But this independence can not, of course, be a purely potential independence, never factually realized. There must, in other words, be times when a given object is not merely *capable of* existing outside the consciousness-relation, but is, in fact, so existent. And the neo-realist, like any other realist, in affirming that objects can be *known* so to exist, necessarily implies that from

a datum immediately before the mind he can obtain knowledge about something not immediately before the mind; that the existent which is *now* in consciousness “means” or refers to things or times not present; and that therefore it is in no way needful that a thing and its relations should be immediately present in consciousness, should be “numerically identical” with a percept, in order that its existence and relations may be truly known. And this is a direct denial, not indeed of epistemological monism in itself, but of the only reason for adopting epistemological monism which Professor Perry mentions.

It appears, therefore, that when the new realism borrowed from “idealism” the dialectic by which it seeks to confute the dualistic type of realism, it borrowed an edge-tool which it is incapable of handling without self-destruction. The considerations—the undeniably plausible considerations—which make for epistemological monism can not logically stop short of thoroughgoing subjectivism; and by that I mean not only solipsism, but “the solipsism of the specious present.” For those considerations reduce simply to the assumption that only the immediate can be known, that only the existences which are actually—and not by any duplicate or surrogate—in consciousness can be apprehended by means of consciousness. It is necessary that this premise be denied by all those who would repudiate the conclusions which its acceptance renders ineluctable.

Let me, then, by way of bringing the latter part of this discussion to a focus, put certain further questions before Professor Perry.

v. Does not the “essential point” which he urges against epistemological dualism involve the assumption that only the immediate can be known?

vi. Is this assumption reconcilable with his admissions concerning the possibility of mediate knowledge? Is it not, in any case, inconsistent with the realistic “theory of independence”?

vii. Has the neo-realist any other reason for rejecting the dualistic form of realism?

4. From the objections brought against the new realism on the score of the paradoxes involved in its objectification of errors, hallucinations, and the like, Professor Perry makes no direct attempt, such as Holt, McGilvary, Montague, and Pitkin have made, to relieve the doctrine; but he does reply to this type of criticism with a *tu quoque*. Idealism, he declares, is no better off here than realism. “The same problem arises either on idealistic or realistic premises.” The answers to the question concerning the relation of “the illusory experience to the object as defined by science,” are not “any clearer on a pan-idealistic than on a pan-subjectivistic basis.” Indeed, the new realists as a school have at least the merit of having grappled

with these problems, even if their grapplings be not regarded as successful; they have attempted "constructive thinking" in these "regions where idealism has simply defaulted." On all this several comments suggest themselves.

(a) In the last-quoted remark, Professor Perry has surely forgotten either history or the dictionary. To "default" is not to fail to succeed; it is to fail to attempt. And there is certainly no paucity of attempts to deal with the problem of error in the writings of idealists. On the contrary, other neo-realists have accused idealists of an excessive preoccupation with this problem; and it is notoriously the generating problem of a great part of historic idealism. Many of the proposed idealistic solutions may be bad solutions, as I think they are. But our neo-realists are scarcely in a position to reproach others on this score. They have taken up the problem somewhat belatedly, after critics had pointed out that it is the touchstone for their entire doctrine; and their "attempts at constructive thinking" upon it have not, I believe, been found by the philosophic world overpoweringly convincing.

(b) That these attempts are as yet successful, Professor Perry noticeably refrains from asserting. Yet it is conceded in "The New Realism" that "the first and most urgent problem for the new realist" is to reconcile with his "theory of immanence" the "apparently hopeless disagreement of the world as presented in immediate experience with the true or corrected system of objects in whose reality we believe." Of the present situation of neo-realism with respect to this crucial difficulty Professor Perry seems to find nothing better to say than that it is certainly no worse than the situation of idealism—which last he evidently regards as hopeless. Now, the *tu quoque* has seldom been deemed by the more austere logicians a really cogent form of defensive argument. It is a little hard, therefore, to understand the serene confidence with which Professor Perry continues to affirm a doctrine of which he appears unprepared to maintain that it has thus far solved a problem upon the solution of which its tenability depends. Can it be that neo-realists have never heard of that mode of "selective nervous response of an organism" which is known as suspension of judgment? It is, I grant, a mental state which is unduly rare among philosophers generally.

(c) Is it, however, true that the objections based upon errors, illusions, and the like, bear as much against idealism as against the new realism? Professor Perry's reason for thinking so, I gather, consists in the reflection that "pan-objectivism" and "pan-idealism" are both forms of epistemological monism and must therefore be equally subject to any difficulties which are alleged to be due to the monistic hypothesis as such. Here seems to be at least a recognition

of the real issue. And the reply would be fatal to idealism, if idealism necessarily *were* a form of epistemological monism. But no idealism of which I have ever spoken favorably is of such a sort. The pure-bred subjectivist, or idealist with the markings of epistemological monism, is the rarest of birds in the philosophic aviary; few indeed of the historic doctrines which bear the idealistic name have been of this type. What is commonly called idealism—but might better be called spiritualism, if that word had not been diverted to baser uses—is a kind of epistemological dualism, or, to use a less familiar, but less equivocal term, of mediatism. It rejects *physical* realism, but it does not deny the existence of entities external to, and independent of, any given moment of cognitive consciousness, or any series of such moments in the experience of any individual conscious center.¹⁰ It is a very trite remark that even Berkeley's metaphysics is in principle realistic.

Now, to either form of epistemological mediatism—the idealistic or the realistic—there is obviously open a way of defining the nature of errors and illusions which is barred to both the realistic and the idealistic form of epistemological monism. To the mediatist error of all sorts consists in the appearance in the consciousness of individual minds, at particular moments, of content which can not, upon reflection, be assigned to the objective order, or at least to the particular parts of that order to which it appears as belonging. As to what this objective order is, the two classes of dualists differ; to the pluralistic idealist, for example, its content is determined by its logical congruency with itself and its empirical congruency with the related experiences of all minds; to the dualistic physical realist, it consists in a residual realm of material things-in-themselves which are what they are independently of all minds. But this difference is another story; in spite of it, the accounts of error given by both theories are generically the same. But the epistemological monist maintains either that all things are equally subjective or that all are equally objective. In either case, he has no means of defining the difference between actual content of consciousness that is merely subjective, and that which is objective; he is debarred from making a distinction between appearance and reality. The new realist, more specifically, holding that consciousness in general is an external relation, in, for, and by means of which alone no content whatever can exist, necessarily denies that any content can exist in dependence on, and exclusively inside of, any *particular* consciousness. Thus he is unable to make use of that natural view about the essence of per-

¹⁰ These distinctions were made, though as *obiter dicta* rather than formally, in my review of "Present Philosophical Tendencies"; cf. pages 674, 677. Professor Perry seems to have overlooked them.

ceptual or other error which dualistic realism and idealism share with common sense.

The first question to settle, then, if the discussion of neo-realism is to make any orderly progress, is the question of the tenability of the relational theory of consciousness and the consequent epistemological monism. This theory is no doubt sufficiently unfavorable to idealism; for it describes consciousness as a virtually otiose thing in the universe, and endeavors to reduce the notion of it to as near nullity as possible. But to realism the theory is absolutely deadly. For the only plausible argument for epistemological monism is, as we have seen, purely subjectivistic in its premises; and the conjunction of such monism *with* realism entails all those contradictory consequences which have now so often been pointed out, and implies that perceptual error is impossible. When this issue is disposed of, the ulterior controversy between physical realism and idealism can be profitably taken up.

ARTHUR O. LOVEJOY.

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY.

PROFESSOR MONTAGUE AS "NEO-REALIST" ON ERROR

IN two ways the problem of error affords a test of "neo-realism." (1) The occurrence of errors seems to contradict the alleged objectivity of the mind's contents in cognition, or the "realism of common sense." "So the first and most urgent problem for the new realists is to amend the realism of common sense in such wise as to make it compatible with the facts of relativity. For this reason especial attention has been given in the present volume to a discussion of those special phenomena, such as illusion and error, which are supposed to . . . set going a train of thought that can not be stopped short of subjectivism."¹ "As the departure from realism was due to the subjectivistic interpretation of error, so the return to realism must be based upon a realistic interpretation of error" (p. 252). In other words, a solution of the problem seems to be required as part of the foundation of the new realism. (2) Even if, however, this were not the case, the fertility of the doctrine as an instrument of research would still be well tested by its success or failure in dealing with this problem, or with any specific objective problem. "Neo-realism" would scarcely be entitled to the degree of respect which its advocates claim for it, if it did not enable us to investigate the world better than its opponents can do. One might admit the "externality" of the cognitive relation, and other planks in the plat-

¹"The New Realism," pages 10-11.