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A. J. Baker

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I Realism

Realism is a pluralistic doctrine or theory of independence.

The fact that discussion is advanced by consideration only of *the issue itself*, and not of the persons who hold views about it, is evidence of the truth of the realistic position.

ANDERSON'S REALISM

Realism is a description that applies to Anderson's general or overall position,¹ including what we can call his 'ontological egalitarianism'. According to this, *whatever exists* – combustion machines, polar ice-caps, wattle leaves, human enterprise; the mental and the non-mental; the 'important' and the 'trivial'; the permanent and the ephemeral – is real, that is to say it is a spatial and temporal situation or occurrence that is on *the same level of reality* as anything else that exists.

In addition to that, realism embraces more particular aspects of his philosophy, including his realistic view of logic, of universality, and of *knowledge*.

This last view – which is commonly equated with 'realism' in a narrow sense – is a theory of 'naïve' or 'common sense' or 'direct' realism according to which, despite the occurrence of errors and illusions (a fact exploited and exaggerated by Descartes and his anti-realist successors), we can and very often do know or observe real trees, tables, or what some philosophers call 'material' things or objects. This plain man's view of

¹ Anderson oscillated between *realism* and *empiricism* (he regarded them as virtually the same position) as the best description of his general position. Thus, he sharply contrasts empiricism with rationalism but also maintains that 'The real object of realist attack is rationalism' ('Realism', *The Australian Highway*, 1958, p. 54). I have opted for realism as the best description, because of its association with objectivism, another key part of his philosophy, and because the term 'empiricism' has the disadvantage that it is frequently used to convey views that are at variance with Anderson's empiricism.

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knowledge was philosophically revived and defended by the movement known as *modern realism* which flourished in Britain, and to a lesser extent in America, in the first part of this century in reaction to the then dominant doctrines of philosophical idealism. G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell were important early members of this movement, though they later developed other views, as were the American *New Realists*, especially W. T. Marvin and R. B. Perry, and Samuel Alexander. The movement profited too from the work of John Burnet on Greek philosophy and of Sigmund Freud on psychoanalysis. Anderson himself was influenced by all of these writers, especially by Alexander, and also by some of the work of the American William James. Anderson was, however, critical of various unrealistic elements in the thinking of the modern realists, including Alexander, and went on himself to put forward, in his teaching and writing in Australia, the most systematic and thoroughgoing realist position that has ever been developed.

But to start with the initial modern realist position, this involved to some extent, as is true of any abiding philosophical controversy, dogmatic counter assertion by the realists against the assertions then dominant – though, as Anderson said, they were certainly not *more dogmatic* than their opponents. However, the realists also backed up their claims by *argument*, including powerful criticisms of competing views of knowledge: representative perception, idealism and sense-data views.

The theory of representative perception (which I will merely sketch and then outline the realists' criticism) is associated in the history of philosophy with a main strand in the philosophy of John Locke. According to it, the mind directly contemplates mental occurrences or 'ideas' that represent or correspond to material objects (or fail to correspond to them in the case of error), but these material objects cannot be directly contemplated. I have direct knowledge of an idea of a tree or a table but only indirect knowledge of the tree or table itself. But this theory, while it has been popular amongst scientists, is regarded by most philosophers as subject to insuperable difficulties. Thus, for example, if we have no direct knowledge of material

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objects how can we refer to them as resembling or giving rise to ideas, and why should we even suppose that there are material things at all? As Anderson puts it, against a ‘picture-copy’ variant of the theory (put forward by Lenin), ‘in order to show that “an idea” is a good or bad copy of “an external thing”, we should have to know them both and compare them – but, of course if we can know external things directly, then the whole picture-theory collapses.’² As this criticism illustrates, the realist technique of argument against the representationist is to show that he is involved in an unavoidable inconsistency, resolution of which entails accepting realism. Take again his claim that we cannot know a tree directly but only an idea of it; if that is so a consistent campaign against direct knowledge would lead him to say that we cannot know the idea directly either, but only an idea of an idea, and so on for ever – which reveals that the representationist does accept direct knowledge when it suits him; and that, of course, is what he also does when he blithely assumes that the trees to which our ideas are judged to correspond are there, available for comparison with ideas.

Rejection of this theory sets the background to the idealist – realist controversy. Idealists from Berkeley onwards all dismissed representative perception as a viable view and sought to repair its deficiencies by eliminating material things altogether and maintaining that whatever exists is mental.

ABSOLUTE IDEALISM

The most powerful form of idealism is ‘absolute’ or ‘Hegelian’ or ‘objective’ idealism which was the dominant western philosophy for most of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, and indeed was probably the most influential philosophy that has ever been in vogue in its own time. It was effectively presented in Britain by a variety of writers, T. H. Green, E. Caird, B. Bosanquet and especially F. H. Bradley, and it was against this philosophy that the realists reacted.

Idealism’s most famous claim is that ordinary things or ‘out-

² *Studies*, pp. 299–300.

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side objects' (apart from other minds) depend for their existence on being known – their *esse* is *percipi*, or in Bradley's words 'Reality is experience'. That is to say, tables, buildings, mountains and so on would not exist if there were no minds (including Absolute Mind) to be conscious of or experience them.

It was this claim, and the counter realist claim that what is known is not constituted by or dependent for its existence on being known, that generated most attention in the idealist–realist controversy, but as many idealists – and Anderson notably amongst realists – saw, this is only *one* of the issues in the controversy and is not the philosophically most important one. Thus, the view that 'Reality is experience' is very closely connected in idealist thought with claims about the nature and grading of reality and about the nature of relations (and not merely the relation of knowing or experiencing), as follows.

1 There is a fundamental contrast (a *metaphysical* or *ontological* contrast) between on the one hand 'ultimate reality', what really is and gives philosophical and moral significance to existence, and on the other hand 'appearances' or 'brute facts' which make up the 'world' as it ordinarily appears, the realm of common sense and (though science is an improvement on common sense) the realm of science. This is a wide claim which involves, as Anderson says, the idealist version of *rationalism*.

2 Ultimate reality is the 'One', 'Whole', 'Absolute' or 'Organic Unity'; it alone is really real, and any lesser existence – an aspect or part or moment of the One or Organic Whole – has a higher or lower *degree of reality* depending on the extent to which it embodies or approximates to the Absolute. Correspondingly, with regard to truth, a belief or judgement has a higher or lower *degree of truth* depending on how near it comes to (unattainable) absolute truth about the Absolute. It is the fusion of this conception of a single ultimate reality, that is, its *ontological monism*, with the knowledge thesis that 'Reality is experience', which gives power and complexity to this idealist system as compared, for example, with the more limited so-called 'subjective idealism' of Berkeley. It is because of this

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fusion that Hegel and his followers speak so often and characteristically about Absolute Spirit, Reason or Consciousness.

3 There is the theory of constitutive or internal relations. According to this more obscure thesis, just as in the special case of knowledge the known thing is somehow constituted by being known or is really internal to the knower, so in the case of all other relations there are no merely 'external' or 'extrinsic' relations. Every relation involves the 'very nature of its terms', and when this is taken in conjunction with the doctrine of the One or Whole it follows that everything is inseparably connected with everything else, so that apparently separate relationships (Bradley cites for example the resemblance between two red-haired men and the spatial relation between a man and a billiard ball) are not separate at all – it is a form of 'vicious abstraction' so to regard them – and they can only be understood as manifestations of the underlying unity of the Absolute.

Now realist criticism, as advanced especially by Moore and Russell and later by Anderson, sets out to demolish each of these tenets of idealism. But having noticed the broad bases of idealism, its maintaining of 1, 2 and 3 in conjunction with the knowledge thesis, and the correspondingly broad nature of realist criticism, I will return now to that thesis and reserve until later chapters treatment of 1, 2 and 3.

IDEALISM ON KNOWLEDGE

In Anderson's view, as against the idealist theory of knowledge, the natural and common sense position to adopt and the one that all of us (including idealists) do in fact tacitly adopt is the realist position that minds and what they know are independently real things. So he asserts this as the true position and in support of it sets out to expose the philosophical errors that have misled idealists and induced them and their followers to find plausibility in their own claims to the contrary.

Anderson, in line with numerous other critics, notes that for the initial errors of idealism we have to go back to Descartes and

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his account of the *cogito* and of thought as an essence, and to the theory of ideas developed by his successors. That is, although idealists took their own position a long way beyond what Descartes and Berkeley for example maintained, nevertheless their position does assume certain basic contentions of Descartes and Berkeley; it was an unquestioning assumption of these contentions that gave Hegel and Bradley, for instance, the confidence to put forward their own more grandiose views.

Descartes advanced a well known ontological dualism of mind and matter according to which there are two utterly separate essential types of being, mental and material substance. But the dualism aside, the important legacy for modern idealism was, first, the view of mental substance as something whose essence consists in thinking (as is supposed to be established by the *cogito*) and the associated claim that all consciousness is self-consciousness, and, second, the view, developed explicitly by Berkeley, that the objects of mind or consciousness, ideas or perceptions, are dependent existences whose being lies in being perceived.

Accordingly, in undermining the plausibility of the idealist case we can start by criticising these views of Descartes and Berkeley. Anderson does so in two ways. One, as will be made clearer later, consists in objecting to the very conception of consciousness as ‘that whose nature it is to know’ and of idea as ‘that whose nature it is to be known’; each conception, he argues, involves *relativism* – which is his technical term for a confused amalgamation of a quality with a relation; consciousness is supposed to be the character of mind and at the same time the relation to that of which it is conscious; ideas are supposed to be essentially related to mind and at the same time to be the character or content of what is known.

In addition, he shows that Descartes’s and Berkeley’s basic ‘demonstrations’ in fact depend on making use of essences, identities and ambiguities. Thus, in the case of the *cogito*, Anderson’s own neat contribution to the voluminous argumentation on the subject runs, in summary, as follows. Descartes’s view is that *I think* is the one proposition that survives the doubting pro-

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cess because I cannot, without absurdity suppose that *I do not think*. This may be expressed, putting in brackets the proposition being tested, as: ‘I think (that grass is green), but it is possible that grass is not green’; ‘I think (that I think), but it is possible that I do not think’, where the first is an acceptable formula but the latter is rejected as absurd, that is, it appears that it is necessary that I think. But, in fact, the absurdity attaching to the second formula depends, not on the bracketed *I think* but on the first *I think*, as is revealed by putting something else in brackets as in the formula, ‘I think (that grass is green), but it is possible that I do not think’, where the absurdity remains. Whereas if the first *I think* is replaced and we have, say, ‘It is said (that I think), but it is possible that I do not think’, there is no absurdity. In other words, Descartes has not tested *I think* at all but smuggled it in from the beginning.³

Likewise, Descartes’s argument that all consciousness is self-consciousness, or that we always know ourselves as knowing, depends on a confusion which Anderson sums up as follows. ‘The assumption is that we cannot suppose ourselves, in knowing, not to know, i.e., we cannot suppose that when we know, we do not know; but it is employed as if it meant that we cannot, in knowing, suppose ourselves not to know. Or, putting the argument positively, we must suppose ourselves, in knowing, to know; hence we must, in knowing, suppose ourselves to know (or, in thinking, think that we think).’⁴ Similarly, in the case of Berkeley, he points out that his confidence in the obviousness of what he claims is in fact based on a confusion. ‘Can there’, he quotes Berkeley as asking, ‘be a nicer strain of abstraction than to distinguish the existence of sensible objects from their being perceived, so as to conceive them existing unperceived?’ But Berkeley’s argument amounts to passing from the bare identity ‘What is perceived cannot be unperceived’ to the conclusion that ‘What is perceived cannot be perceived (or conceived or taken) to be perceived’, that is, that ‘What is perceived must be perceived to be perceived’, which is an argument that depends on

³ *Studies*, p. 103.⁴ *Studies*, p. 31.

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the illicit substitution of ‘perceived to be perceived’ for ‘perceived’.⁵

Arguments similar to those of Descartes and Berkeley flourished in later idealist thought. So when realists sought to advance their own views about knowledge – such as that ‘things known may continue to exist unaltered when they are not known . . . or that the existence of a thing is not correlated with or dependent upon the fact that anybody experiences it, perceives it, conceives it, or is in any way aware of it’⁶ – they concentrated on exposing the fallacious character of idealist arguments making use of ambiguities in such terms as ‘consciousness’, ‘subject’, ‘object’ and ‘content’. Thus Moore, in his seminal pioneer article on ‘The Refutation of Idealism’,⁷ raised the question of what idealists meant when they talked about the ‘content’ of consciousness or sensation (as when, for example, with reference to my seeing something blue, blue is said to be the content of my sensation) and he went on to argue that their use of the word ‘content’ enables them to confuse two quite separate cases: (1) where, for example, blue is a content of my mind in the way that blue is a content of a blue flower or a blue bead, and (2) where blue is a ‘content’ in the sense of being an *object* of which I am aware, that is, where I have quite different relation to something blue, that of being aware *of* it. This confusion – which is another instance of what Anderson calls *relativism*: in (1) the ‘content’ is a quality and in (2) a non-predicative relation – enables idealists to assume the mind-dependence of what is known and at the same time to appear to account for the relation the knower has to what he knows. But the two cases are quite separate. What is asserted in (1) (that my consciousness *is* blue), as Moore ironically notes, is unimportant and very likely false, whereas (2), which is obviously true, presupposes that the blue is ‘an independent real thing’, so that in being aware of it I am already ‘outside the circle of my own ideas and sensations’.⁸

⁵ *Studies*, pp. 29–30.

⁶ W. P. Montague, *The New Realism*, by E. B. Holt and five others, Macmillan, New York, 1912, p. 474; quoted by Anderson, *Studies*, p. 27.

⁷ In his *Philosophical Studies*, esp. pp. 21–30.

⁸ Anderson criticised Moore for his own relativism in this article in using the

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In an analogous way, Anderson criticises idealist claims about the interdependence of knower and known or, as they more often put it, of 'consciousness' and 'idea' or 'subject' and 'object'. Their argument characteristically proceeded by assuming that there was an 'opposition' or 'dualism' between subject and object which posed a problem about how they could be related. According to this, there is the difficulty that the object cannot be known if it *is* distinguished from the subject (for then it is not related to the subject) and it cannot be known if it is *not* distinguished from the subject (for then the two would be identical and there is still no relation). This opposition is then supposed to be overcome by means of the Hegelian principle of the 'identity of opposites' or 'unity in diversity': although subject and object are different this difference is overcome by their underlying identity or unity, and the agency by which this is done is the 'progressive realisation of self-consciousness'. A quotation from Edward Caird will illustrate.

The reason why the two terms, the self and the not-self, thus appear to be independent of each other, or to be brought together only as they externally act or react upon each other, lies in this, that the object is imperfectly known, and the subject is imperfectly self-conscious. This, however, does not make it less true that in self-consciousness is to be found the principle in reference to which the whole process may be explained. . . The dawn of consciousness, in which the external object first comes into existence for us, as opposed to self, is at the same time the beginning of the process by which its externality is negated or overcome.⁹

Anderson rejects idealist contentions of this kind by objecting to the supposed principle of identity involved and to its application to 'subjects' and 'objects'. Thus, as against the principle that apparent differences are really identities, he points out that

term 'awareness' to refer both to the relation of knowing and to what *has* the relation (*Studies*, p. 38n). He also deplored (Archive lecture notes on Moore) his later theory of 'sensibles' and his lack of a positive view of mind which, he argued, took Moore back, nearer and nearer to an idealist position.

⁹ *Essays on Literature and Philosophy*, James Maclehose and Sons, Glasgow, 1892, Vol. II, p. 470 and p. 472.

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'If when we say that A is not B, we are somehow also saying that A is B and B is A, discourse will be impossible.'¹⁰ In other words, differences are absolutely real as is presupposed by idealists themselves when they start to tell us about the differences between subject and object that are to be 'overcome'. It is, moreover, the use of words like 'subject' and 'object' that helps idealists make it appear that there is an inseparable connection between the mind and what it is aware of, for these words, of course, are correlative ones. But, although whenever there is a subject there must be a corresponding object and *vice versa*, it by no means follows, if something A is a knowing subject related to a known object B, that A and B are not independently real things; as is plainly illustrated by a parallel case such as that of marriage: although there is no husband without a wife and *vice versa*, husband and wife are two different persons.

In this way, then, he argues that the realist will not be fazed by arguments turning on ambiguities and obfuscations. There is a whole set of words as well as 'subject' and 'object' – such as 'thought', 'consciousness', 'belief', 'knowledge', 'judgement', 'perception', 'sensation', 'experience' – unclear use of which has lent plausibility to idealist and related positions. To illustrate by reference to 'experience', when we speak of 'A's experience of B' there are several things that may be meant: (1) the *experiencer* A, that is, what it is that is doing the experiencing, (2) the B that is *experienced*, (3) the whole situation A's experiencing B, and (4) the specific relation *experiencing*. But to run these cases together, Anderson is pointing out, is to be guilty of the error of relativism; they can be clearly distinguished from one another; and they provide no grounds at all for saying that A and B are not two separate things.

SENSE-DATA VIEWS

By 1930 idealism was on the decline in Britain and America – though it was still the philosophy taught by almost all Australian

¹⁰ *Studies*, p. 42.