



Personal Experience and Realistic Ontology

There Is No Logically Compelling Transit from Personal Experience to Objective Fact

Immediate experience is the doorway through which we obtain information about the world and our place in it. But this totally plausible contention poses the big problem of how we are to get from here to there. How can immediate experience, always personal and subjective, manage to inform us about matters of impersonal fact regarding objective reality? Interestingly enough, the answer to this impressively theoretical question has a deeply pragmatic cast.

First, a word about experience. Immediate experience comes in many forms: *external sense experience* (seeing, hearing, smelling), *inwardly sensuous experience* (pain, seasickness, hunger), *affective experience* (fear, elation), *cognitive experience* (puzzlement, interest), *aesthetic experience*, *religious experience*, among others. What will mainly concern us here is the first of these—in particular, the relation between people's own perceptions and the objective arrangements regarding which they are generally supposed to inform us.

Experience, to reemphasize, is as such inevitably personal and subjective. It is invariably somebody's experience, always owned by and

personal to some individual. At the level of immediacy there is no such thing as impersonal experience; experience has an ineliminably biographical character.

Of course, people's experiences can agree. And when this happens we can move from *I* to *we*: "We take ourselves to be looking at a dog"; "We are all under the impression that the pavement is wet"; and so on. The experiences of individuals need not be discordant: they can manage to be accordant—and often are. But accordant or not, they remain what they are: the inevitably personal experiences of particular individuals. Experiences that agree are still just so many personal experiences that happen to be in accord. Consensus is not yet objectivity.

There is thus an inevitable gap between perceptual—and thereby personal—experience and objective fact. Contentions on the order of "It appears to me/us that there is a cat on the mat" or "I/we take myself/ourselves to be looking at a cat on the mat" are always about ourselves and will inevitably fall short of stating an objective fact such as "There (actually) is a cat on the mat." For appearing does not guarantee being. The natural reaction to a claim like "I take myself to be seeing a cat on the mat" or "I am having a cat-on-the-mat seeing experience" is "You sound like an interesting person; tell me more about yourself." Be they idiosyncratic or consensual, personal or shared, all such experience-detailing statements will, strictly speaking, be about the experiencing individuals at issue and not about the real world as such. The reports of experience are invariably autobiographical.

There is, accordingly, an unavoidable evidential gap between statements regarding the experience of people (oneself included!) and those that concern the world's objective and impersonal arrangements. The very meaning of objective factual statements is such that no volume of claims in the language of experience can stand equivalent to reality-geared theses of objective fact. If objective information about the world's arrangements is what we are after in inquiry, then immediate experience in and by itself cannot take us there. And it is instructive to consider the reason why.

Objective Reality Outruns Experience

To begin with, it is clear that, as we standardly think about things within the conceptual framework of our fact-oriented thought and discourse, any object in the real world has more facets than it will ever actually manifest in experience. For every objective property of a real thing has consequences of a dispositional character and these are never completely surveyable because the dispositions that particular concrete things inevitably have endow them with an infinitistic aspect that cannot be comprehended within experience.¹ This desk, for example, has a limitless manifold of phenomenal features of the type: “having a certain appearance from a particular point of view.” It is perfectly clear that most of these features will never be actualized in experience. Moreover, a thing effectively is what it does: entity and lawfulness are coordinated correlates—a good Kantian point. And this fact, that real things involve lawful comportment, means that the finitude of experience precludes any prospect of the exhaustive manifestation of the descriptive facets of any real things.²

Physical things in particular have not only more properties than they will ever actually manifest but also more than they can possibly manifest. This is so because the dispositional properties of things always involve what might be characterized as mutually preemptive conditions of realization. A cube of sugar, for example, has the dispositional property of reacting in a particular way if subjected to a temperature of 10,000 degrees Celsius and of reacting in a certain way if emplaced for one hundred hours in a large, turbulent body of water. But if either of these conditions is ever realized, it will destroy the lump of sugar as a lump of sugar and thus block the prospect of the other property’s being manifested. The perfectly possible realization of various dispositions may fail to be mutually compossible, and so the dispositional properties of a thing cannot ever be manifested completely—not just in practice but also in principle. Our objective claims about real things always commit us to more than we can ever actually determine about them.

The existence of this latent (hidden, occult) sector is a crucial feature of our conception of a real thing. Neither in fact nor in thought

can we ever simply put it away. To say that an apple possesses only those features it actually manifests is to run afoul of our conception of an apple. To deny—or even merely to refuse to be committed to the claim—that the apple would manifest particular features if certain conditions came about (for example, that it would have such-and-such a taste if eaten) is to be driven to withdrawing the claim that it is an apple. The process (corroborating the implicit contents of our objective factual claims about something real) is potentially endless, and such judgments are the “nonterminating” in C. I. Lewis’s sense.³ This cognitive depth of objective factual claims—inherent in the fact that their content will always outrun the evidence for making them—means that their endorsement always involves some element of evidence-transcending conjecture.

That my immediate experience bears upon and relates to an authentically real item that lies objectively outside the experiential domain—that it authorizes me to make claims about such an experience-transcendent reality—is accordingly something I cannot establish solely on the basis of considerations invoking such experiences themselves. The very concepts at issue (namely, “experience” and “manifestation”) are such that we can only ever experience those features of a real thing that it actually manifests. But the preceding considerations show that real things do and must always have more experientially manifestable properties than they can ever actually manifest in experience. The experienced portion of a thing is similar to the part of the iceberg that shows above the water’s surface. All real things are necessarily thought of as having hidden depths that extend beyond the limits, not only of experience but also of experientiability. To say of something that it is an apple or a stone or a tree is to become committed to claims about it that go beyond the data we have—and even beyond those that we can, in the nature of things, ever actually acquire. The “meaning” inherent in the assertoric commitments of our factual statements is never exhausted by their verification. Real things are cognitively opaque; we cannot see to the bottom of them; our knowledge about them can thus become more extensive without thereby becoming more complete. The idiosyncratic detail of the real outruns the reach of experientially based information.

Interpersonal Discourse Demands Objectivity

This situation is not particularly good news, for the fact is that we cannot achieve interpersonal communication without achieving an objectivity that goes beyond the limits of our experience. Agreement and disagreement about common objects of concern require impersonal objectivity. Where we do not focus on a common object whose status and standing are independent of our own experiential stance no agreement or disagreement is possible. If you say “I take myself to be seeing a cat on a green mat and it looks brown to me” while I say “I take myself to be seeing a cat on a green mat by a stone fireplace and it looks white to me” we neither agree nor disagree—our statements deal with disjointed issues: your subjective experience and mine, respectively. Contentions about distinct items cannot be brought into coordination—be it by way of agreement or disagreement. What is needed to achieve this communicatively essential desideratum is a commonality of focus through an objectivistic realism that altogether transcends the resources of immediate experience. But given the limited bearing of immediate experience, can such a realism lay claim to rational warrant? Does it actually have a sensible rationale?

Realism Roots in Ignorance, Not in Knowledge

How are we to arrive at objective statements about the real world? Surely science affords our best option here. Yet even though the science of the day affords our *best* estimate of the truth of things, it is still bound to be an *imperfect* estimate. It does not take much knowledge of the history of science to realize that science can really go wrong and steadily undergoes a process of ongoing revision. Surely the scientists of the year 3000 will think no better of our science than we think of the science of three hundred years ago. And this, too, has an important bearing on our problem of objectivity and realism.

What is perhaps the most effective impetus to realism lies in the limitations of human intellect, pivoting on the circumstances that we realize full well that our putative knowledge does *not* do full justice to the real truth of what reality is actually like. This, surely, is one of the

best arguments for a realism that turns on the basic idea that there is more to reality than we humans do or can know. Traditional scientific realists see the basis for realism in the substantive knowledge of the sciences; the present metaphysical realism, by contrast, sees its basis in our realization of the inevitable *shortcomings* of our knowledge—scientific knowledge included.

Such a position automatically preempts the preceding sort of objection. For if we are mistaken about the reach of our cognitive powers—and thereby forced to acknowledge that they do not adequately grasp “the way things really are”—then this very circumstance clearly *bolsters* the case for the sort of realism now at issue. The cognitive intractability of things is something about which, in principle, we cannot delude ourselves altogether, since such delusion would illustrate rather than abrogate the fact of a reality independent of ourselves. The virtually inevitable imperfection of our knowledge is one of the most salient tokens there is of a reality out there that lies beyond the inadequate gropings of mind.

The fact of it is that a meaningful realism can only exist in a state of tension. For the only reality worth having is one that is in some degree knowable. And so it is the very limitation of our knowledge—our recognition that there is more to reality than what we do and can know or ever conjecture about it—that speaks for the mind-independence of the real. It is important to stress against the skeptic that the human mind is sufficiently well attuned to reality that *some* knowledge of it is possible. But it is no less important to join with realists in stressing the independent character of reality, acknowledging that reality has a depth and complexity of makeup that outruns the reach of mind.

We thus reach an important conjuncture of ideas. The ontological independence of things—their transcendence of the deliverances of perception and their autonomy of the machinations of mind—is a crucial aspect of realism. And the fact that this lies at the very core of our conception of a real thing, that such items project beyond our cognitive reach, betokens a conceptual scheme fundamentally committed to objectivity. The only plausible sort of ontology is one that contemplates a realm of reality that outruns the range of knowledge (and, indeed, even of language), adopting the stance that character goes beyond the limits

of characterization. It is a salient aspect of the mind-independent status of the objectively real that the features of something real always transcend what we know about it. Indeed, yet further or different facts concerning a real thing can always come to light, and all that we *do* say about it does not exhaust all that *can and should* be said about it. Objectivity and its concomitant commitment to a reality beyond our subjective knowledge of it are thus fundamental features of our view of our own position in the world's scheme of things. It is the very limitation of our knowledge of things—our amply evidenced recognition that reality extends beyond the horizons of what we can possibly know or even conjecture about it—that betokens the mind-independence of the real.

Objectivity and Postulation

The fact is that we do and should always think of real things as having hidden depths inaccessible to us finite knowers—that they are always cognitively opaque to us to some extent. And this has important ramifications that reach to the very heart of the theory of communication.

Any particular thing—the moon, for example—is such that two related but critically different versions can be contemplated:

1. the moon, the actual moon as it “really” is; and
2. the moon as somebody (you or I or the Babylonians) conceives of it.

The crucial fact to note in this connection is that it is virtually always the first version that we *intend* to communicate or think (self-communicate) about—the thing *as it is*, not the thing *as somebody conceives of it* on the basis of experience. Yet we cannot but recognize the justice of Kant's teaching that the “I think” (I maintain, assert) is an ever-present implicit accompaniment of every claim or contention that we make. This factor of attributability dogs our every assertion and opens up the unavoidable prospect of “getting it wrong.”

Communication requires not only common *concepts* but common *topics*, shared items of discussion. However, this fundamental objectivity intent—the determination to discuss “the moon itself” (the real

moon) regardless of how untenable one's own *ideas* about it may eventually prove to be—is a basic precondition of the very possibility of communication. If my statements dealt with *my* moon and yours with *yours*, then neither agreement nor disagreement would be possible. We are able to say something about the (real) moon thanks to our subscription to a fundamental communicative convention or “social contract” to the effect that we *intend* (“mean”) to talk about it, the very thing itself as it “really” is, our own private conception or misconception of it notwithstanding. When I speak about the moon, even though I do so on the basis of my own conception of what is involved here, I will nevertheless be taken to be discussing “the *real* moon” by virtue of the basic conventionalized intention at issue with regard to the operation of referring terms.

Any pretensions to the predominance, let alone the correctness, of our own potentially idiosyncratic experience-based conceptions about things must be put aside in the context of communication. The fundamental intention to deal with the objective order of this “real world” is crucial. If our assertoric commitments did not transcend the information we ourselves have on hand, we would never be able to “get in touch” with others about a shared objective world. No claim is made for the *primacy* of our conceptions, or for the *correctness* of our conceptions, or even for the mere *agreement* of our conceptions with those of others. The fundamental intention to discuss “the thing itself” predominates and overrides any mere dealing with the thing as we ourselves conceive of it. In the context of communication, our own idiosyncratic experience of things gets relegated into the background.

Our discourse *reflects* our experience-coordinated conceptions of things and perhaps *conveys* them, but it is not in general substantive-ly *about* them but rather about the objective and impersonal affairs upon which they actually or putatively bear.

Ontology as a Work of Conception: On Experience in the Second (Historic, Immediate, Nonaffective) Sense

A glance at any philosophical dictionary suffices to show that ontology constitutes philosophy's endeavor to resolve fundamental ques-

tions about the status and nature of reality. From the very outset there are two fundamental issues here:

1. What entitles us to claim *that* there is such a thing as mind-independent reality?
2. What can we justifiably say regarding *what* that reality is like?

The first of these issues comes down to the question of what entitles us to claim that subjective experience constitutes evidence for the existence of an extra-experiential objective order. And this, as we have just argued, is a matter of postulation—of a stipulative commitment that is ultimately retrojustified *ex post facto* through functional efficacy, through the useful and productive consequences for which it provides. “Just go forward on this basis, and confidence in its prosperity will emerge in due course.”

On the other hand, the second issue is ultimately resolved by means of an inference to the optimal systematization. That is, if you want to know what natural reality is really like, then the best estimate available to us lies in the teachings of the actual science of the day. What experience rather than theoretical reflection shows is that if one seeks to know what natural reality is like—its composition and *modus operandi*—then natural science offers our best available route. That our best is no more than an imperfect estimate is itself, of course, one of the salient object lessons of the history of science. But significant though it doubtless is, it is and remains our best available estimate. And here, as elsewhere, no more can reasonably be asked of us than to do the very best that we can actually manage in the prevailing circumstances.

The Functionalistic Rationale of Realism

Reality (on the traditional metaphysicians’ construction of the concept) is the condition of things answering to “the real truth”; it is the realm of what really is as it really is. The pivotal contrast is between “mere appearance” and “reality as such,” between “our picture of reality” and “reality itself,” between what actually is and what we merely think (believe, suppose) to be. And our allegiance to the conception of

reality, and to this contrast that pivots upon it, is rooted in an acknowledgement of fallibilism.

Our commitment to the mind-independent reality of “the real world” stands coordinate with our acknowledgment that, in principle, any or all of our *present* ideas as to how things work in the world, at *any* present, may well prove to be untenable. Our conviction in a reality extending well beyond our imperfect understanding of it roots in our sense of the imperfections of our scientific world picture—its tentativeness and potential fallibility. In abandoning our commitment to a mind-independent reality, we would lose our hold on the very concept of inquiry.

For one thing, we desperately need the conception of reality in order to operate the causal model of inquiry about the real world. Our standard picture of man’s place in the scheme of things is predicated on the fundamental idea that there is a real world (however imperfectly our inquiry may characterize it) whose causal operations produce *in-ter alia* causal impacts upon us, providing the basis of our world picture. Reality is viewed as the causal source and basis of the appearances, the originator and determiner of the phenomena of our cognitively relevant experience. “The real world” is seen as causally operative in providing for the thought-external shaping of our thought and thereby in providing an underlying basis for the adequacy of our theorizing.

After all, the conception of a mind-independent reality accordingly constitutes a central and indispensable element in our thinking. For it is seen as the target and *telos* of the truth-estimation process at issue in inquiry, providing for a common focus in communication and communal inquiry. The “real world” thus constitutes the “object” of our cognitive endeavors in both senses of this term—the *objective* at which they are directed and the *purpose* for which they are exerted. And reality is seen as pivotal here, affording the existential matrix in which we move and have our being, and whose impact upon us is the prime mover for our cognitive efforts. All of these facets of the concept of reality are integrated and unified in the classical doctrine of truth as it corresponds to fact (*adaequatio ad rem*), a doctrine that only makes sense in the setting of a commitment to mind-independent reality.

Accordingly, the justification for this fundamental presupposition

of objectivity and realism is not *evidential* at all, seeing that postulates are not based on evidence. Rather, it is *functional*. For we need this postulate to operate our conceptual scheme. The justification of this postulate accordingly lies in its utility. We could not form our existing conceptions of truth, fact, and inquiry without a precommitment to the independent reality of an external world. In the absence of this presupposition, we simply could not think of experience and inquiry as we do.

The Pragmatic Dimension

The ontological thesis that there is a mind-independent physical reality to which our inquiries address themselves more or less adequately—and no doubt always imperfectly—is the key contention of realism. But on the telling of the presenting analysis, this basic thesis has the epistemic status of a presuppositional postulate that is validated in the first instance by its functional utility and ultimately retrovalidated by the satisfactory results of its implementation (in both practical and theoretical respects). Without a presuppositional commitment to objectivity—with its acceptance of a real world independent of ourselves that we share in common—inquiry into and interpersonal communication about a shared, objective world would become impracticable.

Realism, then, is not a factual discovery but a functional postulate justified, in the first instance at any rate, by its practical utility or serviceability in the context of our aims and purposes, seeing that if we did not *take* our experience to serve as an indication of facts about an objective order we would not be able to validate any objective claims whatsoever.

From this prospective, too, we see once again that realism is a position to which we are constrained not by the push of evidence but by the pull of purpose. At bottom, a commitment to realism is an *input* into our investigation of nature rather than an *output* thereof. At bottom, it does not represent a discovered fact but a methodological presupposition of our praxis of inquiry; its status is not constitutive (fact-descriptive) but regulative (praxis-facilitating).

Now insofar as ontological realism ultimately rests on such a pragmatic basis, it is not based on considerations of independent substantiating evidence about how things actually stand in the world but rather on considering, as a matter of practical reasoning, how we do (and must) think ontologically about the world within the context of the projects to which we stand committed. This, to be sure, is only the starting point. Having made such a start, what we can—and do—ultimately discover is that by taking this realistic stance we are able to develop a praxis of inquiry and communication that proves effective in the conduct of our affairs. What experience can teach us is that matters run swimmingly once we initially embark on this postulation—that essential human enterprises such as inquiry and communication work out in an efficient and effective way when we proceed on this basis. And so ultimately pragmatic efficacy comes along to satisfy the demands of pragmatic utility.

After all, it makes no sense to try to compare our *putative* truth with the *real* truth, since when something does not represent our *best-available estimate* of the real truth it just would not be our *putative* truth. And so the best-available and most realistically practicable check that we do and can have that our truth-estimates are in order is that their deliverances work out in applicative practice, or rather, more systematically, that the processes and procedures by which they are established are better qualifying than the available alternatives at systematically providing propositions that prove themselves effective in this way.⁴

To be sure, this pragmatic impetus is also based on “experience”—but now in a rather different sense of the term. After all, the term *experience* is very equivocal in English. It can mean:

- Immediate perceptive experience via the internal or external senses (seeing, hearing, feeling queasy, being hungry); German: *Empfindung*.
- Personal participation in an eventuation of some sort (an earthquake, a muting, a famine); German: *Erlebnis*.
- A complex or general course of events in which one participates—as in “experience teaches,” “the experience of many years indicates,” “a long course of experience shows”; German: *Erfahrung*.

Now, the sense of the term operative here is not that of immediate experience (*Empfindung*) but of experience in the variant, systematic sense of *Erfahrung*—of a course of historical experience that involves a communal trial and error amidst the vicissitudes of world history’s complex manifold of contingent and often fortuitous occurrences.

Thus, what is pivotal for ontology in light of this discussion is not immediate experience but historical experience in its larger transtemporal and transpersonal sense of the term. Ontology is a matter of *conception* rather than *perception*. Perceptive interaction with the world is of course a necessary condition for securing information about it by a finite intelligence. And so to effect a transition from “experience” to ontology we have to recognize that *immediate* experience is no more than a starting point. Only experience in the larger, collective and historical sense of the term at issue with *Erfahrung* can provide the more powerful instrumentality required for a cognitive transit from the realm of experiential phenomenology into that of a realistic ontology.

The Issue of Validation

The grounding of our factual claims—their entitlement to be seen as cogent and correct—accordingly roots in pragmatic considerations. For there indeed is good rational warrant for our accepting these various potentially fallible factual claims as true. Two lines of consideration come into play here. The first is need—that we are creatures who require information to guide our actions in the world. But the paramount consideration involves the perspective of realism, now not in the metaphysical sense of the term but in the attitudinal sense of confining one’s expectations “realistically” within the limits of the achievable. This comes into play in the present context through the consideration that the sort of truth estimation afforded by the standard epistemic norms is the best that can be done in the circumstances given the resources at our disposal. The following chapters will develop this pragmatic story in greater detail and will exhibit its bearing on our knowledge of reality in a wide variety of cognitive contexts.