

6. THE METAPHYSICAL PROBLEM

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The metaphysical principle of universal causation is one in which I do not believe. (*A fortiori*, I do not believe in the stronger principle of 'scientific' determinism which will be discussed in Volume II of this *Postscript*.) But I *do* believe, as already indicated, in the much weaker principle, 'There exists at least one true law of nature'. I shall outline a variety of arguments in its favour. Afterwards, I shall draw attention to some of the difficulties in the metaphysical position which I propose to adopt.

Let us first reconsider my answer to the first stage of the problem, given in sections 2 and 4. I emphasized there that scientific theories are guesses or conjectures *which may or may not be true*, and that we can never know of a theory that it is true, even if it is true. What I wish to emphasize now is this: the fact that we do not and cannot know that a theory is true is not in itself a reason why it should not be true. It may be a reason for suspending belief, but it certainly is not a reason for disbelief; that is to say, for believing that the theory is false.¹

We may now reconsider the answer to the third stage, given in section 4. I said there that it is reasonable to act upon (and thus to believe in) a thoroughly discussed and well tested scientific theory, provided we are ready to change our minds in the light of new arguments; of new empirical evidence, for example.

Up to a point, this remark also solves the fourth stage of the problem. For to believe in a statement and to believe in the truth of a statement is the same. (This accords with Tarski's theory.) It may therefore be thought reasonable to believe that there exists a true law of nature, provided there exists a thoroughly discussed and well tested law of nature. Since in fact we have a considerable number of thoroughly discussed and well tested laws of nature, there are indeed empirical reasons for the belief that there exists at least one true law of nature.

It may, however, be felt that this reply is not yet entirely satisfactory. And the mentioning of Hume, in our original formulation of

¹With Hume, knowledge is a kind of justified true belief. This whole approach clashes with mine. If I speak of 'belief' here, it is in a different sense—the sense, rather, of my *Objective Knowledge*. For me knowledge—that is, conjectural knowledge—is objective: it is outside, a product of our minds rather than a state of our minds. I do not take the 'problem' of belief seriously.

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the problem, contains perhaps a clue to the reason for this dissatisfaction: Hume, if not an avowed idealist, was at least a sceptic as to the reality of the physical world. His scepticism was closely connected with his views about induction. He admitted the strength of our belief in a physical world ordered by laws, but asserted that this belief was unfounded. This suggests that the fourth stage of the question should have been: 'I believe that we live in a real world, and in one exhibiting some kind of structural order which presents itself to us in the form of laws. Can you show that this belief is reasonable?'

The issue raised here is that of metaphysical realism, in a form which does not so much stress the existence of physical bodies as the existence of laws. For physical bodies are only an aspect of the law-like structure of the world which alone guarantees their (relative) permanence; which means, on the other hand, that the existence of physical bodies (about which Hume is so sceptical) entails that of objective physical regularities. (*Cf.* section 16.)

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A disastrous fear of metaphysics . . . [is the] malady of contemporary empiricist philosophizing. . . . This fear seems to be the motive of interpreting, for example, a 'thing' as a 'bundle of qualities'—'qualities' which may be discovered, it is assumed, among the raw material of our senses . . . I, on the contrary, do not think that any dangerous kind of metaphysics is involved in admitting the idea of a physical thing (or a physical object) as an autonomous notion into the system, together with the spatio-temporal structure appropriate to it.

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, the *L.Sc.D.* was not a book on metaphysics—at least not metaphysics of 'the dangerous kind' to which Einstein refers.¹ Nor is this *Postscript*. Yet I stated in *L.Sc.D.* that I believed in metaphysical realism. (*Cf.* the second paragraph of section 79, and the end of sections 4 and 28.) And I believe in metaphysical realism still.

¹At least not metaphysics of the 'dangerous kind' to which Einstein refers in the motto translated from his contribution to *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, edited by P. A. Schilpp, 1944, pp. 288–290.

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Metaphysical realism is nowhere used to support any of the solutions proposed in *L.Sc.D.* (In this my method differs from the usual practice of the idealists who, from Berkeley and Hume to, say, Reichenbach, use their metaphysical views to support their epistemological theories.) It is not one of the theses of *L.Sc.D.*, nor does it anywhere play the part of a presupposition. And yet, it is very much there. It forms a kind of background that gives point to our search for truth. Rational discussion, that is, critical argument in the interest of getting nearer to the truth, would be pointless without an objective reality, a world which we make it our task to discover: unknown, or largely unknown: a challenge to our intellectual ingenuity, courage, and integrity. There is no compromise in the *L.Sc.D.* with idealism, not even with the view that we know the world only through our observations—a view which so easily leads to the doctrine that all we know, or can know, are our own observational experiences. (Cf. *L.Sc.D.*, Chapter V.)

This robust if mainly implicit realism which permeates the *L.Sc.D.* is one of its aspects in which I take some pride. It is also one of its aspects which links it with this *Postscript*, each volume of which attacks one or another of the subjectivist, or idealist, approaches to knowledge. It may not therefore be out of place to discuss here and in the following nine sections, if only sketchily, some metaphysical problems as such, especially since they are connected, in several ways, with the problem of the structure and status of science (or of 'scientific knowledge' in the sense explained in section 1). This discussion will engage us down to section 16.

The intention of the empiricist philosophers, from Bacon to Hume, Mill, and Russell, was practical and realistic. With the possible exception of Berkeley, they all wanted to be down-to-earth realists. But their subjectivist epistemologies conflicted with their realist intentions. Instead of attributing to sense experience the important but limited power to test, or to check, our theories about the world, these epistemologists upheld 'the theory that all knowledge is derived from sense experience'.² And they equated 'is derived' either with 'is inductively derived', or, even more often, with 'originates'. They never saw clearly that it is not the origin of ideas

²This is an *Encyclopaedia Britannica* definition of empiricism quoted by Russell in the beginning of his paper on 'The Limits of Empiricism'; see note 1 to section 1.

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which should interest epistemologists, but the truth of theories; and that the problem of the truth or falsity of a theory can, obviously, only arise *after* the theory has been put before us—that is to say, *after* it has originated with somebody, in some way or other—and that the history of its origin has hardly any bearing upon the question of its truth. (I well remember an old peasant up in the Tyrolese mountains who took it for granted that thunder was the noise made by the collision of heavy clouds, and lightning a very hot spark, due to their friction. I have little doubt that the historical *origin* of this straightforward theory must be less suspect—that is, nearer to the inductive model—than that of the more sophisticated theory which modern meteorologists have adopted.)

The empiricist philosopher's belief 'that all knowledge is derived from sense experience' leads with necessity to the view that all knowledge must be knowledge either of our present sense experience (Hume's 'ideas of impressions') or of our past sense experience (Hume's 'ideas of reflection'). Thus all knowledge becomes knowledge of what is going on in our minds. *On this subjective basis, no objective theory can be built*: the world becomes the totality of my ideas, of my dreams.

The doctrine that the world is my dream—that is, the doctrine of idealism—is irrefutable. It can deal with every refutation by interpreting it as a dream (just as psycho-analysis can deal with every criticism by psycho-analysing it). But the widespread belief that the irrefutability of a theory is a point in its favour is mistaken. *Irrefutability is not a virtue but a vice*. This also applies to realism, unfortunately: for realism is also irrefutable. (The refutation of realism is only an idealist's dream. Death, he dreams, may be the awakening which will finally demonstrate to us that while we were alive we were only dreaming. But as an argument this would not even tend to refute realism: if we were to realize, upon waking up, that we had been dreaming, we should do so because we were able to distinguish dream from reality. But this is just what the idealist says we cannot do.) From the irrefutability of idealism follows the non-demonstrability of realism, and *vice versa*. Both theories are non-demonstrable (and therefore synthetic) and also irrefutable: they are 'metaphysical'.

But there is an all-important difference between them. Metaphys-

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ical idealism is false, and metaphysical realism is true. We do not, of course, 'know' this, in the sense in which we may know that $2 + 3 = 5$; that is to say, we do not know it in the sense of demonstrable knowledge. We also do not know it in the sense of testable 'scientific knowledge'. But this does not mean that our knowledge is unreasoned, or unreasonable. On the contrary, there is no factual knowledge which is supported by more or by stronger (even though inconclusive) arguments.

Before considering the positive arguments in support of metaphysical realism more fully, I will first discuss some negative arguments: they support realism by way of a criticism of idealism.

From the point of view of a subjective or idealistic epistemology, the strongest form of idealism is solipsism. The epistemological argument in favour of idealism is that all I know are my own experiences, my own ideas. About other minds, I cannot know anything direct. In fact, my knowledge about other minds would have to depend upon my knowledge about bodies: we have no empirical knowledge of disembodied spirits. If bodies are merely parts of my dream, other minds must be even more so.

The problem of other minds has been endlessly discussed in recent years, largely in epistemological terms. I confess that I have not read all these discussions, and it is therefore not impossible that my simple argument for the existence of other minds has been used by others before (although I do not think it has). It satisfies me completely—perhaps because I always remember that in this kind of inquiry no arguments can be conclusive.

My argument is this. I know that I have not created Bach's music, or Mozart's; that I have not created Rembrandt's pictures, or Botticelli's. I am quite certain that I never could do anything like it: I just do not have it in me. (I know this particularly well since I made many attempts to copy Bach; it made me more appreciative of his inventive power.) I know that I do not have the imagination to write anything like the *Iliad* or the *Inferno* or *The Tempest*. If possible, I am even less able to draw an average comic strip, or to invent a television advertisement, or to write some of the books on the justification of induction which I am compelled to read. But on the solipsistic hypothesis, all these creations would be those of my own dreams. They would be creatures of my own imagination. For there

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would be no other minds: there would be nothing but my mind. I know that this cannot be true.

The argument is of course inconclusive. I may perhaps underrate myself (and at the same time overrate myself) in my dream. Or the category of creation may not be applicable. All this is understood. Nevertheless, the argument satisfies me completely.

My argument is, no doubt, a little similar to Descartes's argument that a finite and imperfect mind cannot create out of itself the idea of God, but I find my own argument more convincing. The analogy with Descartes's argument suggests, however, a simple extension to the physical world. I know that I am incapable of creating, out of my own imagination, anything as beautiful as the mountains and glaciers of Switzerland, or even as some of the flowers and trees in my own garden. I know that ours is a world I never made.

I can only repeat that this argument satisfies me; perhaps because I never really needed it: I do not pretend that I ever doubted the reality of other minds, or of physical bodies. Indeed, when I think of this argument, I cannot but feel that solipsism (or, more generally, the doubt in the existence of other minds) is not so much a form of epistemology as a form of megalomania.

So much for solipsism, and other forms of idealist epistemology which question the existence of 'other minds'. It seems to me quite possible that arguments like the one proposed here prevented Berkeley from becoming a solipsist: being a Christian, he knew that he was not God. So he arrived at the view that there were other minds besides his own, and that it was God who made us perceive that many-splendoured thing, the world of our experience.

Berkeley's version of idealism is as irrefutable as any other, and has little to recommend itself. Even assuming that the epistemological argument favours the solipsistic thesis, it is clear that an appeal to the epistemological argument can no longer be convincing once realities are admitted which are not perceived, such as God and other human minds. Berkeley's attempt to reconcile epistemological idealism and Christianity leads to an apparent compromise which in fact damages both. (Christianity is damaged because Christ's physical suffering is no longer inflicted upon Him by men but by the immediate action of the deity.³)

³See also section 11, below, text to footnote 7.

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None of these arguments should be needed. Realism is so obviously true that even a straightforward argument such as the one presented here is just a little distasteful. There is a certain triteness and staleness about it that reminds me a little of a habit which I dislike: that of philosophizing without a real problem. 'It has been said that all sensible men are of the same religion and that no sensible man ever says what that religion is.'⁴ I feel that to continue my argument would be to disregard the second half of this wise saying.

It would be unjust, admittedly, to say that the idealists had in fact no real problem. Their problem was the (positive) 'justification' of our knowledge and they were caught in a trap: in their own discovery that it was impossible to 'justify' realism. It has been pointed out to me by W. W. Bartley, III that it is unfair to judge them from the point of view that discards the whole programme of positive 'justification' as futile and replaces it by a programme of criticism. (Cf. section 2, above.) I accept this warning. Yet who amongst the idealist philosophers has ever stressed the point that even if realism is true we cannot justify it in their sense, no more than we can justify idealism if realism is false? And that consequently the impossibility of 'justifying' realism does not speak against its truth? And which of them made it clear that since this situation characterizes the logical structure of the problem, it is obviously quite futile to use, as an argument against realism, the fact that it cannot be 'justified'—or, indeed, any similar argument?

The exasperating staleness of the arguments of idealists and sensationists results from their failure to see the inherent logical limitations of their justificationist programmes. They do not see, quite simply, that even a logical proof of the impossibility of justifying realism would not constitute a justification of its negation.⁵

My arguments apply not only to solipsism and Berkeleyan idealism, but to *all* other forms of this malady (so far as I know of them), especially to the various forms of positivism and phenomenalism, and also to the so-called 'neutral monism' of William James, Ernst Mach, and Bertrand Russell, as I shall show in the next section.

⁴*The Note-Books of Samuel Butler* (Shrewsbury Edition, 1926), p. 229.

⁵Bartley has drawn my attention to the fact that a similar point was raised by Ralph Barton Perry in 'The Ego-Centric Predicament', *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods* 7 (1910), pp. 5–14. Perry's point was that if we assume, or admit, the fact of the ego-centric predicament, then *nothing follows* from this about the truth or falsity of realism or of idealism.

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How little Russell *wanted* to be an idealist may be seen from the beautiful passage in which he describes his feelings after his conversion to realism: 'we . . . thought that *everything* is real that common sense, uninfluenced by philosophy or theology, supposes real. With a sense of escaping from prison, we allowed ourselves to think that grass is green, that the sun and stars would exist if no one was aware of them. . . .'⁶

But, being a believer in induction, Russell found that his epistemology did not actually deliver the goods he wanted. 'Theory of knowledge', he tells us, 'has a certain essential subjectivity; it asks, "How do *I* know what I know?"' and starts inevitably from personal experience. Its data are egocentric, and so are the earlier stages of its argumentation. I have not, so far, got beyond the early stages, and have therefore seemed more subjective in outlook than in fact I am.'⁷ The passage is interesting because of the frankness with which it reveals that the realist aim had not been attained yet, and also because of the clarity with which it locates the fundamental mistake: if we admit that our knowledge is guesswork, then Russell's fundamental question: 'How do I know what I know?' turns out to be badly put, for this question, in terms of knowledge, is very much like asking: 'Have you stopped beating your wife yet?' It assumes that I do know, and consequently that induction is valid. The apparently analogous question in terms of guessing, such as 'How (or why) do I guess what I guess?' is not really analogous at all: this question is psychological: it has no epistemological impact. Thus the proper answer to Russell's question is: 'I do *not* know; and as to guesses, never mind how or why I guess what I guess. I am not trying to prove that my guesses are correct, but I am most anxious to have them criticized, in order to replace them if possible by better guesses. And if *you* feel as doubtful about my guesses as I do, I hope you will help me by criticizing them ruthlessly.'⁸

The moment we replace the idea of knowledge by that of guesswork, the apparently 'essential subjectivity' of the theory of knowledge disappears. Perhaps *some* knowledge (*epistēmē*?) would have to be explained, essentially, on a subjective basis—on the basis of what *I* know securely. But guesses, as opposed to this, are pro-

⁶*The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, edited by P. A. Schilpp, 1944, p. 12.

⁷*Op. cit.*, p. 16.

⁸See also the end of section 4 above.

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posals, and as such may be met by anybody's counter-proposals. The problem of their subjective basis in our senses ('there is nothing in my mind that was not first in my senses') need not be raised. *We move, from the very start, in the field of intersubjectivity, of the give-and-take of proposals and of rational criticism.*

Thus Russell's fundamental problem needs to be reformulated in terms of guesses; in terms of the hypothetical character of knowledge which (in another context) he would be the first to emphasize. I was therefore right, I think, to put this as my central point when I replied to Russell's paper at the Aristotelian Society, eight years before he published the passages quoted here. (Cp. section 1.)

Following the passage already quoted, Russell writes: 'If I ever have the leisure to undertake another serious investigation of a philosophical problem, I shall attempt to analyze the inferences from experience to the world of physics, *assuming them capable of validity*, and seeking to discover what principles of inference, if true, would make them valid.'⁹ Thus Russell was prepared to adopt what Kant called a 'transcendental' method: the method of taking scientific knowledge as a fact, and of asking for the principles which would explain how this fact was possible. The result (given in Russell's *Human Knowledge, Its Scope and Its Limits*, 1948) could have been predicted—in fact, I had correctly diagnosed it by my remark at the Aristotelian Society. It was a theory of induction which accepted an inductive principle—or some rules of inductive inference—as valid *a priori*. The difference between Russell's *apriorism* and Kant's mainly lies in Russell's formulation of his inductive principle as a set of rules of *probable* inference.

The (transcendental) method, described by Russell in the passage just quoted, clearly amounts to a renunciation of his subjectivist approach. For here he accepts 'the world of physics' as the objective fact which epistemology ought to explain. Thus, even for Russell, the subjective method is not as essential as might be supposed. And there is no reason why it should govern the first steps if it is abandoned later. Russell's own analysis shows that the subjective basis cannot support the metaphysical realism which he himself wishes to establish, and that other—non-subjective—methods are needed for this purpose.

⁹*Op. cit.*, p. 16. (The italics are not in the original.)

These other methods, however, need not involve us in either Russell's or Kant's *apriorism*. Although they involve a break with traditional empiricist philosophy, and especially with Berkeley's and Hume's metaphysics which questions the reality of the physical world, they do not force us to break with empiricism—with the doctrine that no synthetic principle can be established as *a priori* valid. We can combine the two, empiricism and metaphysical realism, if only we take seriously the hypothetical character of all 'scientific knowledge', and the critical character of all rational discussion.

8. *Hume's Metaphysics. 'Neutral' Monism.*

Hume, like Russell, was a convinced realist whose subjective theory of knowledge led him to metaphysical results which, though he felt compelled to accept them on grounds of logic, he was constitutionally unable to believe in, even for an hour.¹ He seems to have despised his own firm belief in real things as irrational, even though practically unavoidable. He attempted to make use of this very contradiction—which he observed in his own mind—to solve his problem; but this led him nowhere: 'The perplexity arising from this contradiction', he writes, 'produces a propension to unite these broken appearances'—that is to say, his interrupted perceptions of a body—'by the fiction of a continu'd existence. . . .'² Nobody who reads his tortuous argument (Book i, Part iv, section ii of the *Treatise*) can help sharing his disappointment with the final results of what he first so confidently announces as 'my system'.³ Having found that even by taking the bull by the horns he could not make him move another step—that even the contradictions did not stimulate 'the mind' to transcend them—he frankly states at the end of the

¹. . . whatever may be the reader's opinion at this present moment, . . . an hour hence he will be persuaded [that] there is both an external and an internal world'; *cp.* Hume's *Treatise*, end of Section ii of Book i, Part iv. (Selby-Bigge, p. 218.)

²*Treatise*, Selby-Bigge, p. 205. See also the footnote on p. 204 f.: 'This reasoning, it must be confest, is somewhat abstruse . . .; but . . . this very difficulty may be converted into a proof of the reasoning . . .'

³*Treatise*, Selby-Bigge, p. 199, lines 7-12. It seems that Hume, when he first wrote this passage, had no intention of adding to his system 'the second part' (p. 201); a 'third part of that hypothesis I propos'd to explain' (p. 205); and ultimately even a 'fourth member of this system' (p. 208).