A FIRST APPROXIMATION TO

THE REALISM/IDEALISM DEBATE

ABOUT THE EXTERNAL WORLD

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0. Introduction

This work is, as the title suggests, only a first approximation to the realism/idealism debate about discourses concerning the external world.

I made no distinction between everyday discourses about the material world and the discourse of physical science, since I understand that it is more or less widespread, among realists and idealists, to take both as genuinely fact-stating. The main debate, according to my interpretation, is between a realist (in a general sense specified below) about both ordinary and scientific discourses about the external world, and an idealist (also in a general sense I shall explain) about those discourses. (I will use "external world", "physical world" and "material world" interchangeably.)

My main target was to attain a general view of the debate, and especially of the motivations of each stance, as a first step to understand and locate the arguments that contemporary participants in the debate have given in favour and against each position. (I hope this constitutes an appropriate task for the first stage of work on the issue.)

I unavoidably took a provisional position (in the middle between realism and idealism as I understood them here), so I made it explicit in the last sections, mainly in order to make my mistakes easily detectable (and despite the fact that —I am aware— it will sound rather naïf, to say the least).

1. Two Characterisations of Realism and Idealism

Passages like the following show, I think, that it is very difficult to give an appropriate definition of realism or idealism:

> According to metaphysical realism, the world is as it is independently of how humans take it to be. The objects the world contains, together with their properties and the relations they enter into, fix the world's nature and these objects exist independently of our ability to discover they do.
>
> (...)

> Anti-realists deny the world is mind-independent. (...) The Conceptual Relativity Challenge alleges it is senseless to ask what the world contains independently of how we conceive of it. The objects that exist depend on the conceptual scheme used to classify them.[1]

This is not a good characterisation, in my opinion, since it seems to suggest that idealism essentially denies that objects *exist* independently of human mind, and I do not think that is the case. (The idealist position I took as paradigmatic accepts physical objects and facts are, for the most part, existentially and causally mind-independent, but denies they are constitutionally mind-independent.) This definition is ambiguous regarding precisely the controversial issue: what kind of mind-independence it is appropriate to ascribe to the world. (There are more controversial topics on what is usually understood as the debate between realism and idealism, but I will focus on this one because I think it is the most basic one.)

A good characterisation should make explicit the sense in which realists and idealists about the external world make claims about the latter's mind-dependency or mind-independency. I think both Wright and Nagel are more cautious in this respect.

1.1.   Wright's notion of realism and idealism

This is Crispin Wright's characterisation of realism and idealism:

> A reasonable pretheoretical characterisation of realism about, say, the external world seems to me that it is a fusion of two kinds of thoughts, one kind expressing a certain modesty, the other more presumptuous. The modest kind of thought concerns the *independence* of the external world —for example, that the external world exists independently of us, that it is as it is independently of the conceptual vocabulary in terms of which we think about it, and that it is as it is independently of the beliefs about it which we do, will, or ever would form. (Of course, someone may be attracted to only some of these thoughts.) Fully fledged, modesty has it that human thought is, as it were, at best a *map* of the world. (...)

> The presumptuous thought, by contrast, is that, while such fit as there may be between our thought and the world is determined independently of human cognitive activity, we are nevertheless, in favourable circumstances, capable of conceiving the world aright, and, often, of knowing the truth about it. Not merely is there a good measure of non-accidental fit between the external world and our thoughts about it, but we are capable of winning through to the

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[1] Khlentzos (2001; 2004), p. 1.

knowledge that this is so, or at least to a perspective from which we may quite justifiably take it to be so.

(...)

(...) the combination of modesty and presumption, in any area of discourse for which a thinker finds it attractive, is potentially open to two directions of attack, naturally labelled *sceptical* and *idealistic*, respectively. A sceptical attack challenges the presumptuous thought: issue will be taken either with the truth of the claim that our cognitive powers are adequate in the way presumption takes them to be, or with our right to make that claim. An idealistic attack, by contrast, will challenge some aspect of the way in which the idea of independence features in modest thinking. Or, more radically, it may challenge the whole idea that the area of discourse in question is properly seen as geared to the expression of thoughts whose aim is to reflect an independent reality.[2]

I will only try to understand the motivations behind the "modest" thesis of realism about the material world (that the physical world is, completely and in all possible senses, independent of human thought), and behind the idealist challenge to this notion of mind-independence of the external world. I will leave aside the issue of scepticism, and also any idealist challenge to realism based on an attack to the idea that discourses about the physical world are fact-stating. (I will understand that accepting the factuality or truth-aptness of a discourse is necessary for being a realist about that discourse, but not sufficient. And the idealist position I will take as central does not deny that correct discourses about the external world state facts. Both realists and idealists, in my sense, affirm there are physical facts.)

This is another, more concrete, characterisation Wright gives:

Realism is a mixture of modesty and presumption. It modestly allows that humankind confronts an objective world, something almost entirely not of our making, possessing a host of occasional features which may pass altogether unnoticed by human consciousness and whose innermost nomological secrets may remain forever hidden from us. However, it presumes that we are, by and large and in favourable circumstances, capable of acquiring knowledge of the world and of understanding it. Two sorts of ability are thereby credited to us: the ability to form the right concepts for the classification of genuine, objective features of the world; and the ability to come to know, or at least reasonably to believe, true statements about the world whose expression those concepts make possible. Even this much presumption tends, indeed, to be qualified. It is not a common theme in the writings of modern philosophical realists that the world can transcend our concept-forming powers, may exemplify features which human thought is essentially incapable of comprehending —though this is of course a prominent theme in theology. What is a common thought is that the range of states of affairs for whose description

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[2] Wright (1992), pp. 1-3.

our concept-forming powers are adequate at best contingently coincides with, and may very well be more inclusive than the range which is subject to our knowledge-acquiring powers: in short, that some true statements which are fully intelligible to us may nevertheless be, as the point is widely expressed, evidence-transcendent.[3]

By contrast,

In [the idealist's] view realism is founded on a misunderstanding of the nature of truth. It is an error to think of our investigations as confronting an objective array of states of affairs which are altogether independent of our modes of conceiving and investigative enterprises. No truth is altogether "not of our making". (...) There is (...) no possibility of states of affairs which outstrip our capacities for knowledge, still less transcend our understanding.[4]

Taking into account the dialectical situation depicted in this passage, Wright gives arguments to show that

(...) no one could actually form an understanding of a statement if to do so required grasping transcendent truth-conditions; that no one who had somehow achieved such grasp could give sufficient reason to another to suppose that he had, no matter how extensive the survey of his linguistic behaviour; and that to suppose that understanding could consist in such grasp offends against the essential normativity of meaning, whereby meaning has to be determined by constraints by which one can aim to regulate one's linguistic practice.[5]

But realism in the basic form in which I want to understand it is not committed to the view that every truth is verification-transcendent, but to the view that every truth is mind-independent (this idea is naturally held together with the idea that we can only track some of the truths that there are, but the truths we can track could be precisely those we can understand). That is, being a realist about a discourse, in my sense, need not amount to having a verification-transcendent view of that discourse; what it amounts to is to the idea that the facts that we aim at (and sometimes succeed in) stating in that discourse are part of a world of facts which is partly beyond our cognitive reach, beyond the scope of any possible discourse we may develop. In other words, this realism maintains that there may be verification-transcendent truth-makers, that (factual) reality need not be limited to the facts we are able (even in principle) to conceive or know: there may be facts not graspable through the application of any concept we are able of forming. But those verification-transcendent truth-makers need not be the ones which confer truth to our statements. The states of affairs whose actuality confers truth to our statements may

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[3] Wright (1993), pp. 1-2.

[4] Wright (1993), p. 2.

[5] Wright (1993), p. 26.

be all knowable for the realist, though they must have the same level of independence as those other actual states of affairs we cannot even conceive.

This thesis is compatible with the conclusions of the above mentioned Wright's arguments.

Thus, the realist thesis I considered central (the thesis that there probably are facts and features of the world which could not be conceived or classified through any concept) is not one that Wright takes to be relevant for the contemporary debate. The reason why, despite this, I took it as the central realist claim is that it constitutes, in my opinion, the most radically wrong form of the realist notion of the mind-independence of physical reality, of which the paradigmatic modern notion (that Kant, I think, successfully shows must be overcome) is only a partial improvement.

The arguments by Wright quoted above are part of a more sophisticated debate that I will not be able to satisfactorily understand until I attain a clear view of the (maybe too basic) debate I am considering here. Given that my aim in this work is not to critically consider the different positions which are now being held by the participants in the debate, but to understand the ultimate motivations thinkers have to choose being realists or idealists, I will leave Wright's arguments aside for the moment.

In opposition to realism thus understood, the version of idealism I will take as basic here leaves no room to the idea of unconceivable states of affairs, but it need not deny that there may be facts which, for whatever reason, outstrip our capacities for knowledge.

Therefore, I will take it here that the issue of the evidence-transcendence of truth is not essential to the debate about the way in which the external world is independent from human mind, and focus on the question of whether it makes sense to talk about unthinkable facts.

Nagel, who exemplifies the realist position as understood in this work, thinks it does.

1.2.   <u>Nagel's notion of realism and idealism</u>

According to Nagel,

> (...) there may be aspects of reality beyond [human objectivity's] reach because they are altogether beyond our capacity to form conceptions of the world. What there is and what we, in virtue of our nature, can think about are different things, and the latter may be smaller than the former. (...) Human objectivity may be able to grasp only part of the world, but when it is successful it should provide us with an understanding of aspects of reality whose existence is

completely independent of our capacity to think about them —as independent as the existence of things we can't conceive.[6]

This is how Nagel defines his realist position in opposition to idealism:

> In simple terms [realism] is the view that the world is independent of our minds, but the problem is to explain this claim in a nontrivial way which cannot be easily admitted by everyone, and thereby to show how it conflicts with a form of idealism that is held by many contemporary philosophers.

> (...) I shall defend a form of realism according to which our grasp on the world is limited not only in respect of what we can know but also in respect of what we can conceive. In a very strong sense, the world extends beyond the reach of our minds.

> The idealism to which this is opposed holds that what there is is what we can think about or conceive of, or what we or our descendants could come to be able to think about or conceive of —and that this is necessarily true because the idea of something we could not think about or conceive of makes no sense.[7]

In this text, I will use roughly Nagel's characterisation of realism and idealism.

If understanding a statement is understanding its truth conditions (conceiving of the state of affairs which should be actual for the statement to be true), and understanding its truth conditions involves comprehending what would count as our knowing that those conditions obtained (that the state of affairs in question was actual), then the conceivability of a proposition entails its knowability, or at least the conceivability of what would be necessary to know it (even if actually knowing whether these necessary conditions for knowledge had been fulfilled were impossible because of the limitations of human epistemic position, for instance). But the question over which the realism/idealism debate about the external world, as interpreted here, essentially arises is not whether the conceivability of a physical fact entails its knowability, but whether it makes sense to talk of actual or non actual physical states of affairs which are inconceivable.

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[6] Nagel (1986), pp. 91-92.

[7] Nagel (1986), p. 90.

1.3.   A provisional characterisation of realism and idealism for the purposes of this work

To put it in other —maybe more controversial— terms, the core realist claim, in this work, will be that there may be concepts and sentences we are unable to form and understand, corresponding to features of the world which, for that reason, lie beyond what we can conceive. In opposition, the idealist maintains that an analysis of the concept of state of affairs shows that every state of affairs (and thus every fact) is in principle conceivable. That is, I will consider realism about the external world to be any form of commitment to the thesis that physical facts are completely mind-independent, in any sense one could give to the notion of mind-independence. Idealism will be, in this work, the denial of that thesis.

The question to which realism and idealism in the general sense given provide an answer would be: What do the various successful discourses which are considered to be legitimate for stating facts about the external world adapt to? Or: What is the level of externality or mind-independence that whatever constrains our cognitive activity (when we discover a fact, for example) must have? Or: What is that with which our cognitive system gets in touch when a true justified belief whose content is a proposition regarding the physical world constitutes knowledge? (I am not completely sure whether these questions are equivalent; I guess it depends on the particular position taken. In any case, I think they are deeply related.)

2. Motivations and Mistakes of Each Position

2.1.   Claims which are common to both positions

Many of the theses that would seem to be relevant for this debate are vindicated by both realists and idealists about the external world. In fact, I found that a very frequent claim made from any of these two standpoints is precisely that of exclusively possessing the means to give an appropriate account of (at least) the following claims:

- The physical world is existentially and causally mind-independent. Facts are there to be discovered, they are not created by human mind.

- Our fact-stating discourses about the external world can be true or false, and we cannot change, through some decision concerning our descriptive or explanatory interests, whether a given, non-ambiguous statement about the physical world is true or false. Justification does not entail truth. (Idealism as I sketched it does not say that objectivity entails truth; it may be the case that a statement is correctly classified as known while being actually false. That is, correctly fulfilling our epistemic duties does not guarantee success in our epistemic enterprises.)

- We are constrained, in each situation, to consider that certain states of affairs are actual, and this constraint is exercised on the application of our conceptual schemes. Thus, we are not passively determined "from the outside" of our cognitive capacities, but we are not "free" either (as long as we want to stay within correct epistemic behaviour), to lead the application of these capacities to whatever result we want to obtain.

Realists and idealists have different ideas on which kind of mind-dependency and mind-independency must be attributed to the physical world in order to give a satisfactory explanation of these facts.

I think none of the two positions, as interpreted here, is able to account for the facts in question, and I believe —and will try to defend later— that a mixture of the two might have a better chance.

2.2.   Realist motivations and mistakes

As far as I understand, the main motivation for realism is that of giving what is considered to be the only acceptable account of the normativity of our fact-stating discourses, which idealism —the realist claims— is unable to provide, because it does not have the resources to connect that normativity with the only aim it is reasonable to ascribe to our efforts for stating correctly: that of attaining cognitive access to things which are absolutely external or independent from our mind and from the representations it produces (which must be understood, according to the realist, as representations of that mind-independent realm).

For Nagel, objectivity is able to improve the correctness of our representations of the world in an absolute sense.

> In pursuing objectivity we alter our relation to the world, increasing the correctness of certain of our representations of it by compensating for the peculiarities of our point of view. But the world is in a strong sense independent of our possible representations, and may well extend beyond

them. This has implications both for what objectivity achieves when it is successful and for the possible limits of what it can achieve. Its aim and sole rationale is to increase our grasp of reality, but this makes no sense unless the idea of reality is not merely the idea of what can be grasped by those methods. In other words, I want to resist the natural tendency to identify the idea of the world as it really is with the idea of what can be revealed, at the limit, by an indefinite increase in objectivity of standpoint.[8]

I do not think Nagel denies that one can engage in the methods of understanding in question without sharing Nagel's conception of their aim; what he is saying must be that the correct understanding of our attempts to increase our knowledge of the world involves recognising that what we try to know is not constituted by the mind (although the representations through which we can attain that knowledge are acknowledged to be formally constituted by our conceptual schemes).

I should point out that I believe Nagel is mistaken in attributing to the idealist such an optimistic view about the prospects of success of our concept forming capacities. I think idealism can leave room for the real uncertainty about achieving our cognitive aims which is typical of the pursuit of objectivity. (I will turn to this later.)

I believe that the following idealist argument exposed by Nagel is successful to show that the notion of an absolutely mind-independent fact is inconsistent, contrarily to what Nagel thinks:

> The argument is this. If we try to make sense of the notion of what we could never conceive, we must use general ideas like that of something existing, or some circumstance obtaining, or something being the case, or something being true. We must suppose that there are aspects of reality to which these concepts that we *do* possess apply, but to which no other concepts that we *could* possess apply. To conceive simply that such things may exist is not to conceive of them adequately; and the realist would maintain that everything else about them might be inconceivable to us. The idealist reply is that our completely general ideas of what exists, or is the case, or is true, cannot reach any further than our more specific ideas of kinds of things that can exist, or be the case, or be true. We do not, in other words, possess a completely general concept of reality that reaches beyond any possible filling in of its content that we could in principle understand.
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> (...)
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> (...) if we try to form the notion of something we could never conceive, or think about, or talk about, we find ourselves having to use ideas which imply that we could in principle think about it after all (even if we cannot do so now): because even the most general ideas of truth or existence we have carry that implication. We cannot use language to reach beyond the possible

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[8] Nagel (1986), p. 91.

range of its specific application. If we attempt to do so, we are either misusing the language or using it to refer to what is conceivable after all.[9]

As I said, I am convinced by this argument. And, as Nagel (I think rightly) recognizes, it

> (...) does not claim that to exist is to be thought about, or to have been or to be going to be thought about.[10]

That is, a powerful idealist position contends that dinosaurs would have existed even if humans had not, and so on. It is the metaphysical significance of that existence, if it can be put that way, which is under dispute.

Despite the lucidity with which Nagel presents the idealist argument, his response to it seems to me not to have any chance of success:

> It certainly seems that I can believe that reality extends beyond the reach of possible human thought, since this would be closely analogous to something which is not only possibly but actually the case. There are plenty of ordinary human beings who constitutionally lack the capacity to conceive of some of the things that others know about. People blind or deaf from birth cannot understand colors or sounds. People with a permanent mental age of nine cannot come to understand Maxwell's equations or the general theory of relativity or Gödel's theorem. These are all humans, but we could equally well imagine a species for whom these characteristics were normal, able to think and know about the world in certain respects, but not in all. Such people could have a language, and might be similar enough to us so that their language was translatable into part of ours.

> If there could be people like that coexisting with us, there could also be such people if we did not exist —that is, if there were no one capable of conceiving of these things that they cannot understand. Then their position in the world would be analogous to the one which I have claimed we are probably in.

> We can elaborate the analogy by imagining first that there are higher beings, related to us as we are related to the nine-year-olds, and capable of understanding aspects of the world that are beyond our comprehension. Then they would be able to say of us, as we can say of the others, that there are certain things about the world that we cannot even conceive. And now we need only imagine that the world is just the same, except these higher beings do not exist. Then what they could say if they did exist remains true. So it appears that the existence of unreachable aspects of reality is independent of their conceivability by any actual mind.[11]

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[9] Nagel (1986), pp. 93-94.

[10] Nagel (1986), p. 94.

[11] Nagel (1986), pp. 95-96.

According to Nagel, if we can attribute the same general concept of reality that we have to someone belonging to a "nine-year-old species" who supposed that there may be aspects of reality that she (in virtue of her nature) could never comprehend —that is, if we consider her concept of reality applies also to things she could never conceive but are real (such as Maxwell's equations or the theory of relativity), then there will be no reason to maintain that our concept of reality does not apply to things our cognitive nature prevents us from having access to conceive, but which are real.

The problem with this, in my opinion, is that Maxwell's equations are included in the set of *whatever the nine-year-old cannot think of but is real*, only from our point of view, from which equations and physical theories are real but out of her reach. It seems that the only way in which Nagel can maintain that the nine-year-old's concept of reality applies to Maxwell's equations is by having already accepted his particular view of an absolute reality that objectivity can (even if only partially) attain, and is shared by all cognitive beings —in spite of its being accessible in different measures by each of them. In other words: rather than an argument, it seems to me that Nagel's considerations regarding the different cognitive species are just an intuitive way to expose his notion of reality.

On the other hand, reality for the nine-year-olds, for us and for the superior beings Nagel talks about —whether we have the same concept of reality or not— is, according to Nagel, constituted by facts. And the idealist argument can be used to show, in my opinion, that facts are *just* the language into which we decodify whatever affects our cognitive system from its outside. As far as something is a feature of the universe —an object, a property or a fact—, it corresponds to some (human) concept or proposition, whether it is (even if very unlikely) accessible by actual humans, or not.

Idealism recognises the existential and causal independence of facts from cognitive beings in general. So what Nagel should try to show is not that "the existence of unreachable aspects of reality is independent of their conceivability by any actual mind".

Facts do not depend on whether we know them or not; a knowing of a fact of the external world, when considered itself as a fact (as a mental process which we are entitled to classify as knowledge), can be regarded as connected with any other phenomenon by the usual causal laws connecting facts. But both actual and non-actual states of affairs are relative to our cognitive capacities in the sense that the latter give form to all states of affairs.

If the concept of dinosaur had not existed, if no humans had existed, part of what makes us say that dinosaurs existed would have remained the same: the part which is independent from our constitution and from the concept of dinosaur and from our thought that dinosaurs existed and

disappeared long before humans appeared on Earth. But that does not change the fact that facts are essentially possible objects of human thought, whether there is human thought or not.

To sum up, I think that Nagel's view incorporates a true insight and an incorrect derivation from that insight.

The insight with which I go along is the idea that whatever our concept forming capacities respond to with their functioning may be bigger than the factual reality which is the outcome of that functioning. Our cognitive capacities need not be able to respond to everything in that substrate. Postulating that mind-independent, external constraint carries leaving room for the possibility that whatever is behind the facts we are equipped to represent need not be exhaustively "translated" by all the facts we are able to represent.

The wrong derivation is that there may very well be inconceivable facts. And, as far as I can see, the commitment to this mistake, once it is acknowledged that there must be an absolutely mind-independent reality constraining out cognitive operations, is due to the ―I think false― assumption that all reality is constituted by facts.

2.3.   Idealist motivations and mistakes

Idealism is born, if I am not wrong, as a critique of realism.

What I consider to be the most radically wrong realist thesis (the one that Wright attributes to modern theological thinking, and that Nagel seems to share at least in some respects) involves the assumption that the notion of a constitutionally mind-independent state of affairs is consistent. (I present below Putnam's critique of this thesis.)

On the other hand, the most widespread realist thesis among modern philosophers is not, I think, inconsistent in the way the above thesis is, but it constitutes an unjustified assumption which Kant shows must be avoided.

I think both Putnam's and Kant's idealist critiques are successful in showing that realism must be abandoned, but I also believe that none of these two positions (nor any other form of idealism) has the resources to give an appropriate account of the theses mentioned in section 2.1.

For Putnam, the notion of an object, a property or a fact which is constitutionally independent of human cognitive capacities (and thus inconceivable) makes no sense. (In this sense, Putnam's internal realism would be a form of idealism, though this may not respect Putnam's own

terminological preferences: "(…) I still term myself a 'realist' —even if I spell it all in lower case (…)"[12].)

Putnam's main criticism to realism is that it involves

> The metaphysical fantasy (...) that there is a totality of Forms, or Universals, or "properties", fixed once and for all, and that every possible meaning of a word corresponds to one of these Forms or Universals or properties. The structure of all possible thoughts is fixed in advance — fixed by the Forms.[13]

And also

> (...) the comfortable assumption that there is one definite totality of objects that can be classified (...).[14]

For Putnam,

> The traditional metaphysician is perfectly right to insist on the independence of reality and our cognitive responsibility to do justice to whatever we describe; but the traditional picture of a reality that dictates the totality of possible descriptions once and for all preserves *those* insights at the cost of losing the *real* insight (…) that "description" is never a mere copying and that we constantly add to the ways in which language can be responsible to reality.[15]

It is worth noting that idealism in this general sense vindicates it is able to leave room to the idea of an external constraint to the application of our conceptual schemes. What it denies is that that mind-independent constraint is the object of our discourses. And it denies this because it claims that any possible object of any discourse is considered to exist and to have certain characteristics only in virtue of criteria given by the conceptual scheme being applied. However, if that external constraint does not come from (unavoidably internal) objects and facts, and if reality is exhausted by objects and facts, I do not see where that external constraint comes from according to Putnam. Here are some relevant passages:

> Our conceptual scheme restricts the "space" of descriptions available to us; but it does not predetermine the answers to our questions.[16]

> (…) according to me, how many objects there are in the world (…) is relative to the choice of a conceptual scheme. How can one propound this sort of relativistic doctrine and still claim to

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[12] Putnam (1985), p. 30.

[13] Putnam (1999), p. 6.

[14] Putnam (1999), p. 7.

[15] Putnam (1999), pp. 8-9.

[16] Putnam (1985), p. 39.

believe that there is anything to the idea of "externality", anything to the idea that there is something "out there" independent of language and the mind?

Well, it really isn't so hard. (…)

How we go about answering the question, "How many objects are there?" —the method of "counting", or the notion of what constitutes an "object"— depends on our choice (call this a "convention"); but the *answer* does not thereby become a matter of convention. (…) There are "external facts", and we can *say what they are*. What we *cannot* say —because it makes no sense— is what the facts are *independent of all conceptual choices*..[17]

I cannot locate Putnam's putative account of externality in the last quoted paragraph, nor in any other.

According to Putnam,

What is wrong with the notion of objects existing "independently" of conceptual schemes is that there are no standards for the use of even the logical notions apart from conceptual choices. What the Cookie Cutter Metaphor tries to preserve is the naive idea that at least one Category — the ancient category of Object or Substance— has an absolute interpretation. The alternative to this idea is not the view that, in some inconceivable way, it's all *just* language. We can and should insist that some facts are there to be discovered and not legislated by us. But this is something to be said when one has adopted a way of speaking, a language, a "conceptual scheme". To talk of "facts" without specifying the language to be used is to talk of nothing; the word "fact" no more has its use fixed by Reality Itself than does the word "exist" or the word "object".[18]

But how can it be that, if it makes no sense to talk of mind-independent facts, nor of any noumenal reality beyond them, there is still room for facts "coming as a surprise", to put it somehow? How is it possible that there be unknown facts that we still have to discover (that we may never discover)? In other words: I do not see how the existential and causal mind-independence of physical facts can be accounted for without postulating a (not necessarily factual) realm of reality which constrains our cognitive operations from an absolutely mind-independent position.

Saying, as Putnam does[19], that more than one discourse about the material world may be correct (both everyday talk of coloured chairs and fragile glasses and the description given by physical

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[17] Putnam (1985), pp. 32.

[18] Putnam (1985), pp. 35-36.

[19] For example, on p. 37 of Putnam (1985). I should underline that realism as understood in this work is not committed to there being only one true discourse about the external world. What it is essentially committed to is the thesis that, whatever kind of discourse one uses to describe the world, one will not say

science are correct, according to Putnam) does not answer the question about the normativity of those discourses, but rather highlights it even more: how can it be that such divergent interests lead to discourses which are strictly equivalent, which respect certain *limits*? That is, a correct description of a room in everyday terms and a description of the same room, at the same moment, in terms of physical science may be very different, but they are inter-translatable (given one of those two descriptions, the other could be reached), and we would be surprised if they were not so.

Putnam's is not, in my opinion, a satisfactory account of the compatibility between the constitutional or structural dependence of objects and facts on the discourse used to describe the world and the idea that our discourses respond to something external to them. In other words, I think Putnam lacks the resources to account for the "externality" of our cognitive practices necessary for "insisting on the independence of reality and our cognitive responsibility to do justice to whatever we describe" (see quote 16 above).

As for the other main criticism to realism ―Kant's overcoming of the typically modern attribution of primary qualities to the absolutely mind-independent reality―, I think it is also successful as a criticism, but not enough as an account of the external constraint on our cognitive activities.

Kant abandons the implicit assumption of modern philosophy that the same order governs our intellect and the mind-independent world, if it can be put that way. For Kant, not only the everyday world of quotidian objects and facts which modern philosophy had claimed could be explained in terms of primary qualities, but also the picture of the external world given by physics and mathematics, were mere appearance (though only the latter were the fact-stating discourses at which we *must* arrive if we correctly use our cognitive capacities). Being able to reduce a discourse to another, or give an account of the object of a discourse in the terms of another discourse, does not make the more basic discourse less human, nor does it give any guarantee that it transcends the human way of representing whatever affects from the outside human cognitive systems. The modern claim that primary qualities are features of mind-independent reality is thus shown by Kant to be an unjustified assumption.

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something true unless one succeeds in representing, with the probably non-exhaustive conceptual repertoire of the discourse in question, facts which would be there even if no concept-forming creatures existed. This position is not proved wrong by Putnam's considerations regarding the fact that various discourses about the material world may be equally correct (that I think many realists would agree with), but by his critique of the notion of mind-independent fact.

What I think is an equally unjustified assumption, though, is Kant's thesis that the form that all possible human experiences necessarily have cannot transcend human experiences and their objects —the thesis that what is phenomenal cannot be noumenal. What Kant should have claimed to have shown is, I think, that what is phenomenal need not be noumenal: we are not justified in attributing any property to mind-independent reality only on the basis of our incapability of experiencing or conceiving anything real which lacks the property in question. But this gives us no right to positively deny that the noumenon possesses that property.

3. Conditions a Desirable Position Should Fulfil

3.1. <u>First lesson of idealism: acknowledging the limited metaphysical extension of the notion of fact</u>

Accommodating the idealist criticism to the notion of constitutionally mind-independent fact does not involve the risk of ceasing to recognise that physical facts are existentially or causally mind-independent (although I think some improvements must be made in the idealist position in order to avoid this risk, as I will explain below). And I think a desirable position should incorporate that criticism, because I find it convincing.

According to idealism as understood here, the fact that trees, chairs or neutrons, or whatever physical objects are accepted as populating the world (the issue of which physical objects and facts we should consider there are is beyond the scope of this work) would continue to exist even if humans were exterminated, should not deceive us into thinking that those objects are completely mind-independent from us. Being as we are contingent creatures, it would be just crazy to deny, for instance, that dinosaurs (and many other things) existed long before we evolved from apes, or that gravitational force would cease to affect objects as soon as we were extinguished. Those facts are, in a sense, independent from us: they are existentially and causally independent from humans, and so from human mind. They could exist even if we did not, and they are not created by human mind.

Nonetheless, physical facts (like the fact that *That is square* or that *That red ball exists* or that *The water molecules are expanding in the air*) have the form human concept-forming and thinking capacities give them. As Putnam says (on quote 19 above), "to talk of 'facts' without

specifying the language to be used is to talk of nothing". Any fact corresponds to a statement; any object and property, to a subject and a predicate. Any state of affairs involves subsuming particulars under categories, and thus cannot be constitutionally or structurally independent of the mind whose capacities are necessary to make such subsuming.

Therefore, if a mind-independent realm of reality is postulated to exercise a constraint on our cognitive operations, it should be located outside the realm of factual reality; factual reality cannot be absolutely mind-independent.

3.2.   Second lesson of idealism: not relying on unjustified assumptions

As I said, I think the step from the correct acknowledgement that the necessary structure of the phenomenal world need not transcend human mind, to the idea that it cannot (that it can be nothing more than features of the a priori limitations of the structure of any experience or thought we can form) is not justified: we just cannot know, from our epistemic position, whether those features transcend the phenomenal world.

Therefore, a desirable position should not just assume that the noumenal world has or lacks certain features. Ascribing or denying characteristics to the noumenon should be avoided as far as possible. (I will argue below that it is not possible to completely avoid attributing certain characteristics to the noumenon. But, if that ascription is to be justified, its unavoidability and convenience will have to be shown. I think this can be done, as I will try to argue.)

3.3.   The lesson of realism: accommodating the thesis that our cognitive capacities are genuinely externally constrained

I think realism goes in the right direction in ascribing absolute externality or mind-independency to whatever constrains our cognitive operations from their outside, because the very request of externality to the operations of our cognitive system as a whole demands that the constraining element be "untouched" by the results of its functioning. The mistake of the idealist is to try to explain internally what can only be explained externally. "Adaptation" to something already constituted by the application of our cognitive capacities is not adaptation of the cognitive system as a whole to something external to it, but an "internal" adaptation of

concrete cognitive processes to other facts, which are only causally independent from the former.

On the other hand, given that I think a desirable position should incorporate the idealist critiques to the notion of absolutely mind-independent fact, I believe that the absolute externality the realist correctly searches must be found in a non-factual realm of reality. The middle position between realism and idealism about the physical world I am provisionally advocating maintains the realist request of absolute mind-independence, but it does not attribute this mind-independence to physical facts.

Noumenal reality, in its role of external constraint (which is, I think, the only limited sense in which we are justified in bringing the notion into our metaphysical view of thought and knowledge) should not be attributed any characteristic on the basis that we cannot conceive of anything without those features. But philosophical reflection may lead to attributing it characteristics for other reasons. And, according to the view I am provisionally defending, space, time and causality are located in the sphere of the noumenal because the very hypothesis our metaphysical picture wants to accommodate (the hypothesis that our cognitive operations are externally constrained) presupposes space, time and causality. Thus, the only thing we are obliged (and, to that extend, justified, as far as the aim obliging us is legitimate) to say about the noumenon in order to attribute to it the role of external constraint on knowledge is that it is spatio-temporally coincident and causally connected with our cognitive operations:

Conceiving the phenomenon as something determined by a realm which is independent of the possibility of human experience is locating the phenomenon, the noumenon and the relation between them in a spatio-temporal framework, and understanding that relation in causal terms. Therefore, space, time and causality must be beyond the necessary form of experience, for they are part of the processes leading to our experiences. They must be, as well as necessary features of experience, something independent of experience in general.

That is, the Kantian picture of the functioning of our categories when confronted to the noumenon presupposes that both our cognitive system (whatever its noumenal nature may be) and the rest of the noumenon exist in space and time and causally interact. A non spatio-temporal, non causal noumenon cannot be postulated to determine our cognitive system in any way, because the very notion of something's determining something implies that determination is a causal relation which happens in space and time. The view of ourselves being affected from the outside, applying our categories and arriving at a correct representation (the phenomenal world) is a view of something (the external constraint, the noumenon) causally affecting something (our cognitive system), in space and time.

What I am claiming, to sum up, is that the factual reality we can conceive and know is mediately causally determined by a non-factual reality which is the source of all the limits factual reality respects (what mediates between these two realms of reality are our cognitive operations, which respond to the noumenal reality producing representations of factual reality).

Nevertheless, the idealist argument against realism exposed by Nagel (that I quoted above) seems to pose a problem to my own concept of the noumenal reality behind conceivable and knowable factual reality. What I seem to be saying is precisely that I justifiably "have the idea of a reality beyond the reach of any possible human thought except that one". I affirm that we cannot properly represent or state anything within that non-factual, noumenal reality. Nonetheless, I believe there are philosophical reasons to make reasonable to suppose that, indirectly and in a derivative sense of "talking about" or "referring to" or "representing", we can also aim at the noumenon when we make metaphysical statements. (Though I am not sure of this at all.)

What I do not know, on the other hand, is how maintaining the hypothesis that we "are not alone" (that there is something external to our cognitive system, something to which we are related) should be justified. Our intuitive idea of knowledge as responding to something external to us might not so obviously be the only coherent way to conceive of our epistemic situation.

4. Concluding remarks

To sum up, I believe it is reasonable (I am not sure if obligatory) to think of the operations of our cognitive capacities and the results they lead to as externally constrained by something that, in virtue of its being ascribed absolute mind-independency, cannot be justifiedly ascribed any of the necessary features of factual reality —since we have no guarantee that those features transcend factual reality— except for space, time and causality, which must be attributed to it in order for it to play the role it was introduced to play. If our cognitive operations are externally constrained, there must be a noumenon spatio-temporally coincident and causally connected with the phenomenal world, but mysterious in all other respects.

The standpoint I am in now, thus (and from which I will probably move), is realist in the minimal sense that it still defends the idea of an absolutely mind-independent reality, and idealist in the minimal sense that it avoids attributing absolute mind-independence to any fact,

and also avoids ascribing any necessary feature of the phenomenon to the noumenon just in virtue of the fact that we are not able to properly conceive of something real lacking the feature in question.

This is —I want to insist— only a provisional position that I hope I will be able to improve in the future.

I hope this is a good occasion to ask for bibliographical advice. This is a list of titles I came across in my readings for this work, and found tempting:
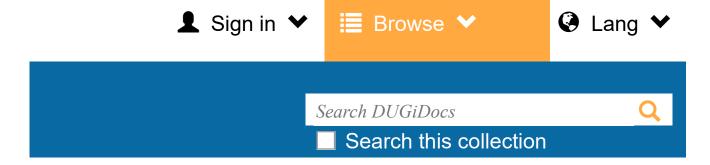
- Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*

- Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense*

- Mellor, D.H. and Olivier, A., *Properties*

- Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*

I will also thank any advice concerning how to continue studying —and narrowing down— these topics.

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A First approximation to the realism/idealism debate about the external world

Pérez de Calleja Mazmela, Mirja

2008

El text intenta fer una primera aproximació al debat contemporani entre realistes i anti-realistes sobre el món empíric, centrant-se en les posicions de Putnam i Nagel. El seu objectiu principal és el d'entendre les motivacions de les posicions i l'estructura actual del debat, i el d'establir les característiques que hauria de tenir qualsevol posició satisfactòria

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