

Praxis and Reality

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Este artigo tenta dar sentido à ideia de pluralidade de mundos e sua relação recíproca. As concepções metafísicas e científicas de realismo são criticadas, enquanto aponta-se para a implicação recíproca entre as noções de prática e objetividade.

RESUMO

Palavras-chave: Realismo, Práxis, Objetividade, Concepção absoluta de realidade.

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ABSTRACT



This article tries to make sense of the idea of a plurality of worlds and its reciprocal relation. The metaphysical and scientist conceptions of realism are criticised while pointing the reciprocal implication between the notions of praxis and objectivity.

Keywords: Realism, Praxis, Objectivity, Absolute conception of reality.

The quest for reality

The quest for reality is one of the main themes in Professor Stroud's philosophy. Both subtle and well known, his theses on this question tell us, on the one hand, that subjectivism - according to which a wide range of properties that we ordinarily consider as belonging to worldly objects are in fact "in the eyes of the beholder" - supposes an unduly narrow conception of our experience, which keeps it from being formulated coherently, is to say: without taking for granted what we want to deny; but, on the other hand, that, given our inability to rise above our own human condition, we cannot attain the detached position from the world that would let us see the relationship between it and our conception of it. And this may perhaps be why, all things considered, Professor Stroud does not affirm the falseness of subjectivism, either.

I find convincing the arguments that lead Professor Stroud to his conclusion, so nothing I'm going to say here is in the least bit likely to refute his points of view. In any case, I would like to believe that what I can offer here is another perspective that 1) helps us to understand the appeal of subjectivism--or of a certain type of subjectivism, to be more precise-- 2) why subjectivism don't need be at odds with the objectivity of our understanding of the world, and 3) why this objectivity, however, is a far cry from becoming an absolute conception of reality.

Monism and pluralism

When we talk of reality, as we do whenever we talk of the world, we usually think of a unique, all-encompassing set of everything that is, and therefore only excludes everything that is not, i.e., the "unreal". And yet, we not only say that another reality --or world-- is possible, but also, in some settings, we even talk of a plurality of worlds and realities.

These turns of speech perhaps contain the origin of the tensions between monism and pluralism, one of the dichotomies that span the history of metaphysics. Indeed, perhaps it is as Nelson Goodman noted on the first few pages of his book on our *Ways of Worldmaking*: a very unbloody way of resolving it, since between one side and the other in the ontological dilemma we can always find a tolerant synthesis that lets us say that *if there is but one world, it embraces a multiplicity of contrasting aspects; and if there are many worlds, the collection of them all is one.*

But even if the dilemma between monism and pluralism allowed for such a pat solution, we still think it well worth it philosophically to reflect on some of the reasons why we can talk of a plurality of worlds and how those worlds may be interrelated.

Specific worlds

Let us start by considering the following case told by Kurt Koffka:

On a winter evening amidst a driving snowstorm a man on horseback arrived at an inn, happy to have reached shelter after hours of riding over the wind-swept plain on which the blanket of snow had covered all paths and landmarks. The landlord who came to the door viewed the stranger with surprise and asked him whence he came. The man pointed in the direction straight away from the inn, whereupon the landlord, in a tone of awe and wonder, said: ‘Do you know that you have ridden across the Lake of Constance?’ At which the rider dropped stone dead at his feet.

This Gestalt psychologist’s point in telling us this story was to make a distinction between “the geographical and the behavioral environment”: belonging to the former was the frozen Lake Constance; and to the latter the snow-covered plains the rider thought he had ridden over.

Koffka seemed to think that while the geographical environment is common, the behavioral environment may be rather more idiosyncratic:

“Let us therefore distinguish between a geographical and a behavioral environment. Do we all live in the same town? Yes, when we mean the geographical; no, when we mean the behavioral.”

This distinction opens several lines of questioning of great interest to philosophy. For example: what is the relationship between the “geographical environment” and the various different “behavioral environments”? What is the relationship among the latter? And can two different subjects share the same “behavioral environment”?

It is by no means clear that Koffka would answer this last question affirmatively; and if not, we would have as many “behavioral cities” as the number of citizens in the “geographical city”. So even if the behavioral cities were idiosyncratic to the point of solipsism, such that every individual had his own, we would still have to acknowledge that the behavioral cities of citizens that live in the same geographic city are nevertheless quite similar to each other, or at least quite a bit more than the behavioral cities of other inhabitants from a different geographic city. Here I am referring to the huge number of living beings of whom we could say that they display a particular behavior and that likewise wandering through it are dogs, cats, rats, pigeons, cockroaches, and a long list of other types of animals. Clearly, my behavioral city looks much more like any other human’s, than, say, that of one of those bats that also inhabit my geographical city.

It is not hard to go from the city to the world, so we could easily say that every living being has its world or reality, a world or reality determined by its specific way of life, or in terms reminiscent of Aristotle, its vital praxis, since in the end Aristotle thought that life was but a praxis.

What we have then is that, without having to assert ourselves regarding the solipsist version of pluralism, according to which every individual has his own world or reality, we could say that there are specific worlds or realities, a plurality of realities or specific worlds. Each individual's world would thus have an identical—or at least very similar—world or reality to that of the other specimens of his own species, and different from the world belonging to individuals from other species.

The great chain of being

But getting back to the beginning, this plurality of worlds or realities is inscribed in a single and all-embracing reality, and the presumption of Western philosophy—and of culture—has long been that that group is ordered and hierarchical, which means that living beings are ordered into a set: the idea of the *scala naturae*, or the great chain of being, whose ultimate and highest element (step or link) is in fact made up of us human beings.

However, such a hierarchy is not easy to justify. Aristotle, who we just mentioned earlier, was one of the pioneers in trying to do so, and also one of the thinkers who used arguments of the most different kinds to back it up: physical, biological, ethical, esthetic...

According to him, when we look at living beings as part of the all-embracing cosmic order, what we find is that these beings do not all participate in the same degree of beauty, nor goodness, nor in the sum of that complex praxis that they understand as life. Rather, what we notice is an uninterrupted slope as complex in their life activities as it is in their autarchy; a passage from merely living to living well, a morphological order that would culminate in man and would have a physiological substrate in having a higher body temperature than the rest of the animals.

Today we know that this last criterion is simply untrue, given that many other animals have a body temperature higher than ours-- chickens do, for instance. We find that talking of beauty and goodness is walking on thin ice as well, since, parodying Wittgenstein's reply to Farrington when the latter defended the obviousness of the superiority of civilized man's life over a caveman's life, we can certainly concede that it seems clear to us that we are more beautiful and that our life is better than, say, the life of rats, but we would have to ask the rats if they feel the same way about us! Moreover, our knowledge of natural history shows us that complexity is not always a selective advantage over simplicity: after all, dinosaurs became extinct but we still have lizards, and it is not very hard to picture scenarios in which we humans are wiped from face of the earth and yet rats, now that we just referred to them, could continue inhabiting it perfectly well.

In short, a fairly plausible way to interpret the ontological meaning of Darwinism may be by saying this ends with the idea of the natural scale, and leads to seeing the distribution of living beings as if forming a tree-like structure where it does not make much sense, judging by strictly biological criteria, to talk of the superiority of some life forms over others.

Empirical worlds

However, one may wonder if the anthropocentrism that Darwin slammed the biological door on couldn't manage to sneak back in through a window. I stop a meandering ant by putting my foot down in its track. I don't attribute any fear, or happiness, or sadness, or even anger to that ant. In fact, I don't think the ant sees me or even perceives me in general. It no doubt detects an obstacle, but I wouldn't endow the ant with any particular belief that

this obstacle is a human being, let alone me. The truth is, I'm not quite sure what particular intentional contents to attribute to its states of perception, nor, by extension, to its psychological states.

What I do know, given the difference between its sensory organs and mine, is that its experience of the world, its world or empirical reality, must be very different from mine. As different as the life of that bat that Thomas Nagel wondered about some forty years ago in "What is it like to be a bat?" We talked before about specific worlds, and now we can talk about worlds or empirical realities associated with them. Every species, every life form, has its own particular way of experiencing the unique reality that embraces us all.

The same thing happens with these empirical worlds as with the specific or vital worlds to which they correspond. I think it would be folly for us to try to hierarchize them if the criterion we used to do so were biological. After all, in this view, the best way to consider the sensory systems is as parts of the body, instruments that let the body carry out the praxis that constitutes its life, a bit as James Gibson considered them. Taken that way, one would have to agree that an ant's sensory organs let it make the discriminations that have led it to survive to this day as a species, much as our organs let us survive as a species. This rules out establishing any hierarchy at all among the different phenomenological worlds the same way as it rules out establishing hierarchy between the life forms to which they belong and condition.

And yet, there does seem to be some asymmetry between the empirical worlds of these social insects and ours. Did we not say that while they make up part of the contents of the empirical world of humans, the opposite case is not true? Does this not mean that our experience of reality is richer and better fitted than theirs?

I am afraid this path will not lead us to setting ourselves above the other living beings. After all, we know that although we beat out some animals in some sensory modes, in others they beat us hands down. For example, although we may boast of distinguishing different colors better than cats do, dogs are notoriously better than us in the senses of smell and hearing.

But there is another reason why we cannot rest on the pretension of superiority of our empirical world to lay claim to a place of privilege in the all-embracing set of reality. We now know that our experience of reality is as “misleading” and “limited” as it is for any other species.

Indeed, if there’s one thing we know today, five centuries after the unleashing of the scientific revolution, it is that many of our inklings about nature turn out to be erroneous. It is not just a few isolated intuitions, such as that the sun revolves around the earth, get proven wrong by science. What this *seems* to question—and I underline the “seems”—is what we could call the realism of common sense, which by the way we are all immersed in on a daily basis.

As I have pointed out on other occasions, what characterizes this realism is the dual thesis of the existence of a reality whose existence and properties are independent from our knowing, thinking, or perceiving them, on one hand, and the conviction, on the other, that that is the reality our everyday sensory experiences in fact give us access to.

Moreover, this last conviction is the one that modern philosophy and science (and let us remember that the difference between the two developed gradually at best) challenge, both by postulating the existence of macroscopic or microscopic worlds that our bare sensory organs wouldn’t give us access to in any case, and, perhaps even more decisively, by insisting that the world we

perceive is the product not only of the qualities that the entities perceived objectively possess, but also of the peculiarities of our own sensory organs. This teaching started off with the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, as Locke called them, and became radicalized with the Berkeleyan-Humean critique of it, and we can say reached its pinnacle when Johannes Peter Müller formulated his law of specific energies of the sensory nerves. That law of specific energies went on to become the catchword of “physiological Kantism” as espoused by a great many of the fathers of psychophysics, and is a good reminder of just how much of ourselves we put in what apparently is given to us.

In short, if we were asked to synthesize what science teaches us about our sensory faculties, a possible answer would be that they are adaptive mechanisms that are sufficiently suited for us to get on in the meso-cosmos we move in, but not very reliable epistemically. The manifest image our empirical world presents has a lot of construct and very little to do with the scientific image of it, if we wish to state it in Wilfrid Sellars’s terminology.

Epistemic Anthropocentrism

Even so, we can use these very considerations that discredit our empirical world to build arguments in favor of our epistemologically privileged position out of respect to the rest of the living beings.

Indeed, if we have been able to make all these observations it is because we are capable of transcending the limits of our empirical world, an ability lacking in all other living beings that we know of. It is a capability that I would link in the end to our mastery of an articulated language.

Of all the living beings we have dealings with, only we are able to postulate the existence of entities that lie beyond our facul-

ties to perceive, and only we are able to acknowledge that our empirical world is only one of many, and that each species has its own. So, while the all the other species are unaware of the limits of empirical reality, and for precisely that reason they prove insurmountable to them, we can discover these limits, and therefore transcend them. We know that reality is more than just our empirical world.

More optimistically, we could even argue that, of all the living beings we know, only we are able to go beyond our empirical reality and into the unique and all-embracing reality. And this is especially thanks to the development of science, since in the end, science is what lets us find out the existence of entities located beyond sensory experience, and even what explains to us the characteristics of our own empirical world—for instance, that our skill at distinguishing colors depends on the particular nature of the cones that populate our retina—and of empirical worlds different from our own; for example: the way frogs see.

This seems to confirm what we previously formulated as a mere suspicion: the anthropocentrism that Darwin shut the door of biology to seems to sneak back inside through the window of epistemology. This window, as an Aristotelian anxious to save his “Philosopher’s” good name may now protest, was also held open by his master, and wide open in fact, he may add, since apart from his physical-bioethical and esthetic considerations, perhaps the main reason for granting privilege over the rest of the animals on the earth was, after all, metaphysical and epistemological in nature: his possession of an intellect that enabled him to know the order of reality...except that as we now know, this order is not the one Aristotelian theory meant, but the one revealed to us by modern science.

Intelligible reality

Nevertheless, there is something of a paradox in this “anthropocentrism”, so paradoxical that we may wonder whether the word is even right to characterize the position we’ve just outlined. Indeed, it seems he himself is telling us that man’s superiority over all other living beings we know of stems from our ability to know a reality that is not only sensible (we can sense it) but also intelligible, and accessible precisely by transcending not only our particular empirical world but also even our specific world, our particular form of life.

Here Aristotle sometimes points to intellect as a divine faculty that man partakes of and whose action does not need any bodily activity, being able to provide him with the knowledge of the cosmic order of what he, like the other living beings, forms part of. In other words, borrowing the expression from Putnam, the intellect is what lets man rise above a merely human perspective and accede to the “point of view in the eye of God”. With different nuances, this type of realism is still found in many of the thinkers—scientists and philosophers alike—who were driving forces of the scientific revolution: Galileo, Descartes, ...a type of realism, however, that can be given a secularized spin, such as the one drawn up by Bernard Williams in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Indeed, taking his cue from Peirce, Williams considers that the development of science should converge towards an absolute conception of reality that every investigator would accept, regardless of his nature, and it would be able to explain the different conceptions of the world, itself included².

2 “[...] the absolute conception will, correspondingly, be a conception of the world that might be arrived at by any investigators, even if they were very different from us... It is centrally important that these ideas relate to science... The aim is to outline the possibility of a convergence characteristic of science, one that could meaningfully be said to be a convergence on how things (any way) are [...] The

In this point of view, then, science would allow man to transcend not only his particular empirical world but also his specific world, the one linked to his form of life, thereby gaining him access to an intelligible reality, a conditionless or absolute reality that includes and articulates all perspectival realities, including our own.

This forges a different type of realism, different from the common-sense one that assumes the existence of a reality independent from our knowing, thinking, or perceiving it—its ontological dimension—but differs from it in that it considers that science, and not our sensory organs, is what gives us access to that reality. In other words: it disagrees in its epistemological dimension. This realism has been given different surnames: metaphysical scientific, and so on.

Faith in science and the pulsion of objectivity

So many different arguments have been hurled against this type of realism that it may prove difficult to add anything original. Even so, it is worth wondering where it gets its appeal, and appeal it certainly has. So much so, that I would hazard that this variety of realism, and not the realism I referred to as common sense, is the philosophical position that comes closest to it today.

Indeed, along its epistemological dimension, I find it common enough to feel, at least in our societies, that science is the privileged way of discovering reality. And such faith in science certainly presupposes an image often presented by the metaphysical realists—although I must confess I am thinking mostly of Williams—of it being an activity whose practitioners share an extraordinary similarity in that it is founded not on any deliberated convention, but on the facts.

substance of the absolute conception... lies in the idea that it could nonvacuously explain how it itself, and the various perspectival views of the world, are possible... It will be a conception consisting of nonperspectival materials available to any adequate investigator, of whatever constitution [...]. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the limits of Philosophy*. London, Routledge, 2006. Pp. 139-40.

Furthermore, if we move from its epistemological dimension to the ontological, then, as I said earlier, the gap between metaphysical reality and common sense narrows even further, since it is not only the common sense of our societies but of any society at all to assume the objectivity of what is real, its independence with respect to our thinking, knowing or perceiving.

That assumption is so universal that the skeptic David Hume, even though he believed there was no way this very thing could ever be proved, considered it a belief that nature had inculcated in us, and as such, could never be eradicated. I personally do not think his position in this regard was all that far-fetched, even to the point where I would tend to say that there is a pulsion in us toward objectivity, an unstoppable tendency to believe that reality is objective, a belief we accept without needing any justification and that I suspect we would maintain even if we were shown that such justification is impossible.

Besides, what could we possibly say to anyone who asked us –a philosopher, no doubt—to justify our belief in the objective existence of reality? Perhaps, in Bertrand Russell’s jocular way when he told about the letter someone had written indignantly because he was not as solipsist as the letter-writer, we could point out that the mere act of formulating such a question is already presupposing the existence of that same reality whose justification is requested. Or perhaps, now that I think of it, we could remind him that often what we think or say turns out to be wrong and we can’t find the glasses we’ve been searching all over the house for; tangible proof, if there is any to be had, that what turns our thoughts or prayers into truths is not the person who has them or states them, but the facts of the world, that same way as what lets us finally find out misplaced glasses is that they actually were somewhere in the house all along.

Objectivity and praxis

And yet, I wonder if these self-evident truths on which, if I'm not mistaken, the metaphysical realist could rely couldn't also be used to question his absolute understanding of reality.

Let us see.

Without a doubt, finding the facts that corroborate or refute our thoughts or claims is independent of those thoughts or statements. Nor is the act of our looking responsible for bringing into existence what we see, but it is equally evident that what we see we wouldn't see if we weren't looking, and we wouldn't find the facts unless we were thinking or talking about them...or we made them the *object* of any intentional act on our part.

If we take objectivity as being the capacity that reality has to corroborate or refute, satisfy or frustrate the intentional attitudes of a subject, then we could generalize the previous observation and argue that the facts do not become objective, but that to the extent that they confront a subject of intentional attitudes or, given that the latter involve an activity done the former—thinking, saying, looking..., we could also claim that reality is only objective because of its relationship with certain praxis.

A mirror, for instance, reflects reality, but does not have it as an object. The state of its surface is causally dependent on the facts of the world, but it doesn't know them. In front of the mirror, we could say, reality is not objectivized; it has no corroboratory or refutory power, precisely because the mirror is not a suitable subject of intentional states.

So, far from being an obstacle for objectivity, intentional subjectivity, or rather praxis, is the necessary condition for its manifestation. Reality certainly does not depend on intentional

states—except of course to the extent that they trigger an action capable of transforming it, but it does not become objective unless it is due to its relation with them.

If we are right, objectivity is only from the relation to the subject in question. In our case, to say it in James's way, it is impossible to access a reality that does not show "the trail of the human serpent"³. And science, in which the metaphysical realist trusts, is no exception to this rule.

Obviously, this is not about denying the objectivity of knowledge it gives us, or even about negating its epistemically privileged nature or its characteristic capacity to generate a degree of unparalleled doxastic convergence attained in other human practices. Rather, like the claim we just made shows, it is about remembering what is obvious: namely, that science is a product of human action, and it is in the conditions of this action—for example, in the predictive, explanatory or technological interests it pursues, which are clearly cultural values, --and not in any impossible transcendence from our own human condition, that we can find the keys to understanding the characteristics that open the door to the mirage the metaphysical realist sees when he thinks it can give us access to an absolutist conception of reality.

Conclusion: Praxis and Reality

In the second part of his *Philosophic Investigations*, Wittgenstein wrote: "*What has to be accepted, the given, is -- one could say -- forms of life*".

Historically, the given has played a dual role in philosophy: epistemological and semantic. The given has constituted the last court of appeals for our cognitive demands, as well as the limit of

³ "The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything" *Pragmatism and The Meaning of Truth*. Harvard U.P. London. 1978. p. 37.

the intelligibility of our discourse. Appealing to the given is the last way to justify our supposed knowledge; referring to the given is the last way to try to explain the meaning of what we say.

However, if the given in turn signals the final limit of the justification of our cognitive aspirations and of the intelligibility of our discourse, and if the given are the forms of life and these are many, the consequence seems no other than that it is impossible to transcend our own form of life. Or to put it another way: if Wittgenstein is right, then Williams is wrong...or vice versa.

It seems clear to me that Williams is the one who is wrong. But Williams's error should not make us conclude that our understanding of reality is just one more in comparison to the reality of any other living being. As far as we know today, we all have reasons to say it is superior. And that is because our "complicated form of life" (to borrow the expression from Wittgenstein again), a form of linguistic life, lets us gain a self-awareness, which is something all other living beings we know of are lacking; self-awareness that in turn makes us aware of the existence of other forms of life that we can say have other worlds or realities.

When our form of life stopped being simply complicated and became immensely complicated, allowing the appearance of a social and historical practice known as science, the limits of its intelligibility spread, and let us integrate, even programmatically, the different realities we know of in a single reality. Except that this reality, whose knowledge we spread, will never be able to transcend the limits of the objectivity that our own form of life, an increasingly complex praxis, itself imposes!