

What a World! The Pluralistic Universe of Innocent Realism*

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ABSTRACT

The method of metaphysics: Metaphysics is empirical but depends not, like the sciences, on recondite experience but on close attention to aspects of everyday experience we ordinarily scarcely notice. "Real" is a broader concept than "exists" (which applies only to particulars) and also applies to phenomena, kinds, and laws, which are real, but not, of course, existent entities. But "there are real kinds, laws, etc." doesn't imply that all the kinds and laws we believe are real, are. I call my approach "Innocent Realism" because--though it's certainly not naive--it requires attending to experience, so far as possible, without substantial preconceptions. There is one real world, enormously varied but also integrated. It includes physical stuff, kinds, laws, etc. and, here on earth, a vast array of human artifacts, physical, social, intellectual, and imaginative, all intimately interconnected. All this requires human mindedness (a better word than "mind" because it doesn't suggest that human mentality is an organ like the heart or the liver). Rather, it's a complex congeries of dispositions and abilities: to understand even such a relatively simple thing as what's involved in someone's believing something, we need to take account of the person's dispositions to behavior, verbal and otherwise; to the neurophysiological realizations of these dispositions; and to their connections to the world and to words in the person's linguistic community--this last requiring other people's words-world connection. "Virtual" reality is just one more computer artifact, clever, no doubt, but not metaphysically startling. It's oversold, but this is advertising hype, not serious metaphysics.

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Truth is rarely pure and never simple.
Oscar Wilde¹

Metaphysics is, or at least, by my lights it ought to be, about the world; it is an *a posteriori*, empirical discipline. So metaphysical inquiry relies, not just on reasoning—though of course it requires that, to make explanatory conjectures, to draw the consequences on those conjectures, and to check how well they stand up—but also on experience; not, however, the recondite kind of experience needed by physicists, microbiologists, paleontologists, psychologists, etc., but on close attention to aspects of our everyday experience so familiar that ordinarily we scarcely notice them.²

This conception, I note, avoids both the long-standing reliance of metaphysicians on the *a priori* method, and the more recent scientific trend of hoping simply to borrow our metaphysics from currently-accepted science;³ it is between apriorism and scientism. This is partly why I call my kind of realism “innocent.”⁴ It tells you to start by just looking, paying attention, so far as you can without preconceptions; so, it is innocent of such weighty claims as “currently-accepted theories in the mature sciences are mostly true.”

Moreover, this conception opens up the way to understanding how the world, and we, must be if successful inquiry, including successful scientific inquiry, is to be even possible—without denying that results from the sciences may have contributory relevance to metaphysical theorizing. And at the same time, it explains how it is that metaphysics can seem to be *a priori*, even though it really isn't: we don't have to leave our armchairs to think metaphysically, because we already have the necessary experience.

“What is there?” Quine famously asked long ago, as metaphysics was just getting back on its feet after the Logical Positivists' *canard* that it was cognitively meaningless or at best bad poetry; and answered with characteristic wit: “Everything.” True enough—but also characteristically unhelpful. Quine's subsequent formula, “to be is to be the value of a variable,” made matters, if

¹ Algernon, in Oscar Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Earnest: A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* (London: Chiswick Press for Leonard Smithers and Co., 1899) act 1, p. 15. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/ssd?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t8w95552b>.

² It is derived from C. S. Peirce. See generally Susan Haack, “The Legitimacy of Metaphysics: Kant's Legacy to Peirce, and Peirce's to Philosophy Today,” *Polish Journal of Philosophy* 1 (2007): 29-43.

³ I use “science” in the now-standard English sense, which is much narrower than, e.g., the German “*Wissenschaft*.”

⁴ There is a preliminary statement of my Innocent Realism in the final section of Susan Haack, “Reflections on Relativism: From Momentous Tautology to Seductive Contradiction” (1996) in Haack, *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate* (1998), pp.149-66. Further details were developed in my “Realisms and Their Rivals: Recovering Our Innocence,” *Facta Philosophica* 4, no.1 (March 2002): 67-88.; and in *Defending Science—Within Reason* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003) chapter 5. Then there is “The World According to Innocent Realism: The One and the Many, the Real and the Imaginary, the Natural and the Social” (2014) in Julia Göhner and Eva Maria Jung, eds., *Susan Haack: Reintegrating Philosophy* (Berlin: Springer, 2016), 33-58.

anything, worse. (Quine, 1961, 1).¹ Still, Quine's was *almost* the right question—except for his nominalist insistence on reading “to be” as “to exist.” “What is real?” is better; but immediately raises another question: “What exactly does it mean to be real?”

Quine would doubtless complain that, like his fictional Wyman, who maintained that, though Pegasus didn't *exist*, nevertheless he *subsisted* (Quine, 1961, 3). I am multiplying senses unnecessarily. But I think it crucial to distinguish *reality* (the more general concept of being) from *existence* (the mode of being of particulars). I adopt, and slightly adapt, the understanding of reality offered by Duns Scotus: the real is *what is thus and so whatever you or I or anyone believes about it*.

The core thesis of Innocent Realism is this: there is one real world, enormously various, and yet at the same time integrated—a kind of pluralistic universe. In this one real world there are, first, physical (natural) things, stuff, and events, *and* physical kinds, phenomena, and laws. These kinds, laws, etc., are emphatically *not* additional but abstract “existent entities,” but they are real nonetheless, as are the potentialities, the as-yet unrealized possibilities, and the limitations involved in law-likeness. This is not to suggest that our terms for kinds all refer successfully, or that the laws that we believe to hold are real; nor is it to suggest that everything is determined by natural laws. It is better expressed, not as “kinds and laws are real,” but as “there really are kinds and laws—though we may be wrong about *what* kinds and *which* laws are real.”

In “our” corner of the world, the earth—which according to well-warranted current scientific theorizing is just a tiny part of a vast universe, which is itself perhaps, according to less-warranted scientific speculation, only one of many “multiverses”—there is also a vast array of human artifacts, physical, social, intellectual, imaginative, etc. To be sure, the universe is vast, and there may be intelligent life elsewhere; in which case, the richness of the one real world is even greater. But I focus here on the list of human artifacts, which is nearly endless, and growing daily. It includes:

- Physical artifacts: aqueducts, arrows, books, bombs, cutlery, clothing, computers, drains, dancing shoes, dongles, etc.
- Social artifacts: mating and marriage customs, systems of markets and money, religions, educational systems, legal systems, the news media, the entertainment industry, scientific communities, societies, big tech, social media, etc. Yes, these artifacts are socially constructed, if that means that there would be no such things but for what groups of people do; but “socially constructed” doesn't imply “not real.”

¹ W. V. Quine, “On What There Is” (1948) in *From a Logical Point of View* Harper Torchbooks, 1961), 1-19, p.1.

- Intellectual artifacts: languages, concepts, scripts, systems of numbering and measurement, musical and other notations, histories, computer programs, websites, apps, etc., and theories of every kind—scientific, philosophical, legal, etc.
- Imaginative artifacts: myths and legends, plays and poems, fictional characters, places, and scenarios, pictures and symphonies, architectural designs, novels, cartoons, computer games, etc. Yes, there are real fictional characters, real fictional places, etc.; but of course, these aren't real people, or real places (Haack, 2013).¹

I emphasize that this is just a very rough and ready preliminary classification, for heuristic purposes only; these are nothing like separate kinds, let alone different “levels,” of reality. Culture, as I might say (using the word in its broadest sense), is like an intricately and densely interwoven tapestry of many different-colored threads overlaid on the natural world, and everywhere enabled and constrained by its potentialities, powers, and limitations.

All those physical artifacts both exploit and are constrained by the properties of physical stuff; you can't make arrows out of butter, computers out of grass, or bombs out of cotton. And all these different kinds of artifact are intimately intertwined.

A system of money requires physical tokens of value, be it cowrie shells, banknotes and coins, or electronic impulses. A legal system requires courtrooms, law books, judges' robes, prisons, *and* languages, concepts, etc.—and is the subject of a whole genre of novel and movie, the legal thriller. Or think of all the paraphernalia involved in a 21st century wedding: the minister, the church, the flowers, the photographers, even, these days, wedding planners' websites. Again, the sciences require all kinds of physical equipment to obtain their *recherche* observations, they need laboratories, and of course fancy computing equipment; but they also require specialized vocabulary, notations, etc., the whole panoply of means of scientific communication, *and* the imaginative constructions of scientists—and they too are the subject of novels, plays, movies, etc. Plays require theatres, actors, costumes; scenery, novels require paper and printing presses, or, now, their electronic equivalents; paintings need canvases and paints; movies need films, cameras, lights, ... and so on and on. I'm sure you can continue the list for yourselves.

The distinction of nature and culture, moreover, is by now somewhat blurred, because of the many ways we humans have altered the natural environment, and the many plants, creatures, etc., that now exist only because of the human manipulation of nature.

“This is all very well,” you may be thinking. “But haven't you simply taken mind for granted, without argument, or even acknowledgment? And doesn't that mean that you are covertly committed *either* to some kind of metaphysical dualism, *or else* to a crude identification of the mind with the brain?” I prefer to avoid speaking of the mind as if it were a thing, almost another

¹ See Susan Haack, “The Real, the Fictional and the Fake,” *Spazio Filosofico* 8 (2013): 209-17.

organ like the heart or the liver—let alone a place; it is better to speak of human “mindedness,” which has the virtue, being unfamiliar, of suggesting something more like a condition, or a congeries of functions and abilities.

Yes, so far, I have taken human mindedness, for granted; but no, that doesn’t commit me either to acknowledging mental, as well as physical, stuff, or to saying that the brain is all there is to it. Rather, I believe, human mindedness arises, in a kind of virtuous spiral, from the interactions of nature, individual, and culture. I first came to this conclusion as, in my capacity as epistemologist, I struggled to understand what it is to believe something, and how what you perceive can change your beliefs; but then began to realize that this is just one instance of the enormously many and more complex interrelated interactions we need to understand.

Take a relatively simple example. Tom’s believing, e.g., that tigers are dangerous involves, first, his having a complex multiform disposition to behavior, verbal and other: to run away if a tiger is approaching, not to put his arm in the tiger cage at the zoo to feed the animals, etc, and to warn others if there’s a tiger coming, and to assert, or assent to, “tigers are dangerous,” and so on. This multiform disposition, second, is realized in some way in the receptors in his brain that register input from the world and the activators in his brain that prompt him to run away from a tiger, utter “watch out, a tiger!”, to assent to “tigers are really fierce animals,” etc. Third, these dispositions to action and to speech (or other sign use) are associated in his brain with the same things in the world with which that vocabulary is associated in his linguistic community.¹

This is, as I said, a (relatively) simple case; to include mathematical or theoretical beliefs or beliefs about the past, etc., would be one challenge; to extend the approach to other propositional attitudes another, and to deal with emotions, or self-awareness, harder yet. But even in this simple case there’s a complex congeries of interrelated relations. There’s the threefold relation of individual, words-and-linguistic-community, and the world; but this threefold relation in turn requires the connection of receptors and activators in other people’s brains to words (or other signs) and to things and events in the world.

A normal human newborn has a brain, but a brain that hasn’t yet developed the interconnections with world and words involved in belief and other propositional attitudes; these will come, very gradually, as the child interacts with the world and those around it. And it is as it does so that the baby becomes minded—and no longer just a human being, but a person. (An in the aged these

¹ This all began in my *Evidence and Inquiry* (1993), chapter 6; continued in *Defending Science*, chapter 6; and was made explicit in “Belief in Naturalism: An Epistemologist’s Philosophy of Mind” *Logos & Episteme* 1, No.1 (2010): 1-22; than further developed in “Brave New World: Nature, Culture, and the Limits of Reductionism,” in Bartosz Brozek, Jerzy Stelmach, and Łukasz Kwiatek, eds., *Explaining the Mind* (Kraków: Copernicus Center Press, 2018), 37-68.

connections may gradually wear out; Alzheimer's can leave a sufferer "de-mented," losing, and eventually devoid, of his or her mindedness.)

The growth of mindedness is thus, in a sense, inherently social. But how is human culture possible, you may ask, unless people are *already* minded? Well, human beings are by nature capable of articulated vocalization, and we are social animals, not solitary, like cheetahs. The very smallest "cultural" developments, like the first sounds that come to be used and taken as warnings, contribute small developments of mind; and as culture gets more complex, so does mindedness. It's a virtuous spiral, as I said; and incidentally explains why I have found it so useful a tool to ask students to make a glossary of all the new terms they inevitably learn in a course of mine, which helps them think more sophisticated thoughts.

And now it's time, mindful of the theme of the meeting for which this was originally written, "Facing the Future, Facing the Screen," to offer some brief thoughts on where "virtual reality" fits in. Is the so-called "metaverse," as some may think, a whole other universe not even acknowledged in my metaphysics? No! "Metaverse" (like "Cloud" storage, which is neither nebulous nor in the sky) is clever but misleading advertising; and "virtual reality," if I understand it correctly, is a typically overblown word for a new class of computer-artifact. A telephone enables me to hear someone far away, television enables me to see and hear events far away, Zoom enables me to see and hear those far-way people, and so forth; and a virtual reality headset enables me to move around as if I actually were in another place.

All very cool, maybe; but not metaphysically startling; after all, for an additional sum one can buy a headset that displays a little photograph of your actual surroundings in one corner—so you don't trip over the furniture or the dog! (Stern, 2022)¹ We know you can't have a real drink in a virtual bar, or even on a virtual trip to a real bar. If, like those business students who make a virtual visit to a businessman in India, it's the visit, not the CEO in Delhi and his family, that's virtual; and for all the business-school hype, you don't "have lunch" with this family, (Ellis, 2022)² but at best eat your lunch, here, while experiencing something like being there. But now I'm overshooting my word-limit; if you need to know more, you'll have to have your avatar call my avatar!

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¹ Joanna Stern, "Improving VR Headsets Puts a Better Metaverse into View" *Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 24, 2022, A12.

² Lindsay Ellis, "Virtual in the New Reality for M.B.A. Students", *Wall Street Journal*, May 23, 2022L: A11.

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