WHAT IS REALISM?

by Michael Ayers and Paul Snowdon

I — Michael Ayers

ABSTRACT A scholastic-Cartesian schema faithfully maps ordinary, effective ways of dealing with intentionality; yet its apparent incoherence provokes philosophers into opting for one of two stances, ‘Cartesian’ or ‘direct realist’, seemingly incompatible, yet each seemingly in accord with ordinary thought. A wide range of canonical and current theories, realist, idealist and hybrid, essentially involve one option or the other. We should instead consider why the language of intentionality, with its apparent anomalies, works so well. Released from the obligation to opt for one stance over the other, we can identify a robust realism different in kind from anything currently on offer.

Is there such a thing as realism tout court? It may seem not. Realists about one subject-matter commonly contrast it with some purportedly less real subject-matter: primary with secondary qualities, facts with values, universals with particulars (Platonism), particulars with universals (nominalism). Global anti-realism is possible, but realism with respect to every subject-matter seems mere ontological quietism. So my title might seem to call for a general criterion by which to judge whether an interpretation of any given class of statements is realistic. Such a criterion would be Michael Dummett’s ‘touchstone of realism’, the thesis that every statement in the given class is determinately either true or false.

Yet something is lost by so reducing to the rank of one of a broad class of supposedly similar questions an issue at the heart of philosophy, between idealism and realism. It is a necessary and sufficient condition for a position to be, in the chief traditional sense, ‘idealist’ that it denies the independent or absolute reality specifically of sensible or material things, so that some ‘realists’ about other, appropriately immaterial things (minds, universals, moral values or whatever) may nevertheless be counted among ‘idealists’. If such ‘idealism’ is a species of anti-realism, it is one that raises peculiarly fundamental issues in epistemology and ontology just because it concerns our most fundamental faculties and knowledge. A realist tout court, we may
therefore say, is a philosopher who adopts an argued, rationally
tenable position incompatible with idealism in this traditional
sense. My title accordingly asks what form a tenable, unambigu-
ously anti-idealist position might take. That this question is both
difficult and topical is suggested by the currency of doctrines
which, although professedly realist in this sense, are nevertheless
plausibly accused of being tantamount to idealism.

Some Potted History of Philosophy. What, then, is idealism, if it
is not merely anti-realism with respect to one particular class of
statements, about material things? A certain conceptual frame-
work for representing the relation between thought (including
experience) and its objects gave rise to the usage of the terms
‘idealism’ and ‘realism’ under consideration, and also underlies
rather a lot of modern philosophy. That framework is embodied
in a traditional scholastic distinction employed by Descartes in
explaining his usage of the word ‘idea’.¹ He tells us that the repre-
sentive elements in thought, ideas, can be considered in either
of two ways, formally, as mental acts or modes of thought, or
objectively, with respect to their objects or content. The
expression ‘my idea of the sun’ is therefore ambiguous, referring
either to my thinking of the sun (which includes having percep-
tual experiences of it), or else to the sun itself—not, however, the
sun as it is in reality, but as it is ‘in my understanding’, i.e. as I
conceive of it, or experience it. All this can be set out as follows:

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the idea  
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/        / \  
the thing  
\        \  
/        / \  
the act or  
mode of  
\        \  
thought  
\ \ \ \ \ \ \ \ \  
= ?  the thing as it is conceived of, = ? the thing as it is in reality, ‘in the mind’ in itself
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I’ll come to the equivalence queries (=}?) shortly. First, we can
take this scholastic-Cartesian schema more generally as a formal

¹ See especially Meditations on First Philosophy, Preface and III, Replies to the First
and Second Sets of Objections (Oeuvres de Descartes, edd. C. Adam and P. Tannery,
account of certain features of natural language, namely of ways in which we deal linguistically or conceptually with intentionality. To say that Du\textsuperscript{\textregistered}rer's picture of a rhinoceros is not much like a rhinoceros is to take the picture objectively, not formally: the comparison is not between some paper with black lines on it and a rhinoceros, but between a rhinoceros as D\textsuperscript{\textregistered}rer depicted it and a rhinoceros as it really is. To say that the Minister's statement took too long and was in any case irrelevant is to take the statement first formally and then objectively. (In the case of linguistic representation, further systematic ambiguity notoriously attaches to 'what was said', taken objectively.) In effect, all that Descartes is telling us initially, before the music starts, is that his term 'idea' shares a certain sort of systematic ambiguity with such ordinary terms as 'picture', 'statement' and 'thought', not to speak of 'concept' in its scholastic employment. All, so far, is as philosophically neutral and innocuous as (say) a simple identification of type-token ambiguity. As for the distinction between formal and objective existence, that too can be read as one way, also neutral, of distinguishing from ordinary predicative statements those significant statements that involve reference (or quasi-reference) to, and/or description of, represented things as represented things, without regard for how things actually are. Talk of existence in someone's imagination, or of something's being so in a story, is not, after all, technical or peculiarly philosophical.

Now for the metaphysical music, or such of it as suits the present theme. A natural question for philosophers to ask is the ontological question of what precisely we are talking about when we describe ideas taken objectively, aka 'things as we conceive of them', 'things in the mind', 'intentional objects' and so forth. As my queried equivalences suggest, two incompatible answers readily present themselves.\textsuperscript{2} Descartes evidently favoured the already popular answer that we are talking about the representing entities (i.e. thoughts or experiences) themselves, but with respect to what makes them specifically this thought or that (their 'form'). He therefore defines an idea (taken objectively)

\textsuperscript{2} Incompatible, unless for Spinoza, who identifies the intentional object both with the act of thinking and with the real object, by making every mode of thought identical with a mode of extension (say, a motion in the brain), which is both its immediate and its real object.
to be ‘that form of any given thought through the immediate apprehension of which I am conscious of that very thought’. 3

The second part of this sophisticated definition affirms that our awareness of having a thought or experience is second-order or reflexive: we are not first so aware of the thought that we have then to consider or infer what it is a thought of. We cannot be aware of an experience or thought of ours without having that logically prior awareness or thought of its object. But this ‘object’ is a thing-as-we-conceive-of-it, or as it appears to us. Since we can be aware of that, and know how it is, even when, for all we know, the thing-as-it-exists-formally is very different, or even when there is no formally existing thing correspondent to the thing ‘in our mind’, it would seem to follow that to describe a thing-as-we-conceive-of-it is not to give an account of anything beyond ‘the form of our thought’. Note that this view does not postulate a third entity between thought and reality, such as a ‘sense-datum’ has sometimes been held to be. Nor does it suggest or assume that ideas taken objectively could in principle be characterized in the terms of a special private language other than the public language we employ to characterize real things. Rather, it is an ontological thesis that collapses the intentional objects of thoughts into (specifying forms of) the thoughts taken as intrinsic states of thinkers, rather than identifying them with real things external to thinkers. On this view, in characterizing our ideas taken objectively we are characterizing our subjective mental states rather as, in characterizing Dürer’s rhinoceros (‘It is surely wearing armour’), we are characterizing Dürer’s picture, not some real rhinoceros that may have served, directly or indirectly, as Dürer’s model. So too the correctness of our report to our optician of what seems to be there before us is independent of what is actually there, even if its optical significance is not so independent.

Reasonable as this argument may seem for identifying ideas taken objectively with ideas taken formally (and so for distinguishing what exists objectively from what exists formally),4 it


4. Another way of putting the issue: which distinction did Descartes see as a mere distinction of reason, that between the idea taken formally and the idea taken objectively, or that between the thing as it exists objectively and the thing as it exists formally? My answer is, the former distinction.
was, in effect, deployed by Descartes, along with the sceptical worry that knowledge cannot extend beyond what exists objectively, to promote the notion of a general disparity or gap between things as they appear to the senses and things as they are in themselves. As we all know, his attempt to bridge the gap and cross to an austere reality of matter in motion was not a success.

Locke was another philosopher who in general assumed that ideas, considered as 'objects of the understanding', are ultimately forms of thought, so, in effect, drawing a hard distinction between intentional object and real object. Locke's empiricist bridge across the Cartesian gap consisted in his theory of sensitive knowledge, embodying a causal theory of signification. In sensation, on this theory, we are immediately aware that something external is causing a 'simple idea' of (say) white in us, which (since we can take simple ideas as signs of their regular causes) automatically 'makes us know' that what the idea signifies, the power or quality in things we call (after the idea) 'white', is externally present. We can also identify, through reliable patterns of simple ideas, causally linked clusters of powers, and so can have knowledge of a nomologically structured world. This interesting epistemological theory has decided advantages over Descartes's. Not only is it naturalistic (as opposed to Platonic-theistic), but it also allows the senses to be independent sources of non-inferential knowledge, which (pace some current 'best explanation' and reliabilist approaches to perceptual knowledge) is surely right. Moreover, it allows us, again rightly, to have knowledge of the existence, sensible appearance and causal properties of things without thereby being in a position to know their underlying nature. Yet to treat each simple idea as an effect in the mind which possesses signification in virtue of its apprehended external origin is to shift from the notion of an idea as a thing-existing-objectively towards something more like some twentieth-century conceptions of a sense-datum. The intrinsically blank mental effect, such as the idea of white, becomes the true or immediate object of sensory awareness, the proper or primary bearer of the term

6. Not just like the entities of high sense-datum theory (or Hume's impressions), however, since Locke's simple ideas are modes of thought, not possibly mind-independent beings.
Moreover, taken purely as such effects, simple ideas would leave us totally ignorant of what the causes they signify are like. Locke does hold that we can only make sense of the world on the hypothesis that some simple ideas, ideas of primary qualities, resemble their causes. Yet this is to conflate the philosophical conception of a simple idea as blank effect or sign with the commonplace, pre-philosophical notion of a ‘perceived’ object that may or may not resemble the real object.

Some early-modern philosophers believed that the Cartesian gap cannot be bridged, and some of those were idealists. Idealism has something in common with scepticism of the senses (Kant’s ‘problematic idealism’). In a way idealists accept, in a way they reject, the idea-reality dichotomy. Roughly, they accept the impossibility of getting beyond things as we experience and conceive of them to things as they are in themselves, but bracket off the latter either as non-existent or else as beyond understanding, a perhaps necessary, but ineluctably empty posit. The difference from scepticism lies in the idealist thought that things as we perceive or conceive of them constitute the subject-matter of genuine knowledge and systematic science, an accessible, reliable world that is ‘objective’ in the current sense, as well as in the scholastic-Cartesian sense. The ideal, in so far as it is amenable to systematic validation, is the real. Superficially, this is responding to the Cartesian gap by denying that it exists; yet, at a deeper, often unacknowledged level, it is simply deciding to live with it. Understandably, but misleadingly, idealists often claim to be realists.

These remarks call for qualification. We can distinguish between idealism specifically or narrowly with respect to the material or sensible world, and ‘global’ idealism. Berkeley was an idealist of the first kind, taking the mind-dependence of the sensible world, the object of natural science, as proof that reality is fundamentally spiritual. He carefully excepted the mind itself, as an object of immediate intuition, from the idealist argument; and, as Kant noted, he held as firmly as Descartes that human reason can penetrate beyond our sensory ideas to an independent, articulate reality (the ideas of a creator God). Kant’s own philosophy, of course, is a global idealism, idealism in the full

7. Cf. Essay, II. viii. 18; II. xxxi. 2.
sense. For him, nothing is known as it is in itself and intellect’s legitimate employment lies on this side of the epistemic gap.

A globally idealist theory, less radical and, in some ways, strangely more modern than Kant’s, was published in England nearly a century before Critique of Pure Reason, three decades before Berkeley was still perfecting ‘immaterialism’. A fundamental principle of Richard Burthogge’s philosophy\(^8\) is that the immediate objects of knowledge are shaped by our faculties, sense and intellect: that is, by the ways in which we experience the world and by the logical structure of the language in which we think about it. Extension itself is not conceived of as it really is, as the paradoxes of infinite divisibility show, while substance, accidents, powers, resemblance, whole and part, cause and effect and the other distinctions and categories we necessarily employ in thought ‘own no other kind of existence ... than an objective one’. ‘Metaphysical truth’ can be no concern of ours, since we cannot look across the epistemic gap to check whether our notions conform with reality. We have therefore to be satisfied with defeasible ‘logical truth’, the criterion of which is the relative coherence or harmoniousness of the hypotheses we form in the face of experience: ‘In science as it is in archwork, the parts uphold one another.’ Burthogge has not unreasonably been seen as a precursor of Kant; yet, despite all differences, the modern reader is irresistibly reminded of Quine.

There is a more straightforward way of repudiating the Cartesian gap than by so transforming ideas into (in Berkeley’s phrase) ‘real things’. Some early critics of ‘the way of ideas’ responded by insisting on the identification, at least in favourable circumstances, of the thing existing objectively with the thing existing formally, the intentional object with the real object.\(^9\) Reid later took a similar ‘direct realist’ line. Where Descartes emphasises that the same representation can be considered in two ways, ‘direct realism’ stresses the two ways of considering (or

two modes of existence of) the same thing. It is true that we may distinguish the letter we ‘see’ from the letter actually on the optician’s screen, but Descartes’s own way of drawing just such a distinction, between the sun as it exists in the understanding and the sun as exists in the (real) sky, itself suggests that what he is distinguishing and comparing are not the sun and something else, a mental representation or idea, but simply the way the sun is in reality and the way the same thing, the sun, is perceived to be. We can at least as properly say that one thing, the letter on the optician’s screen, is an N, although it looks like an H, as that what is on the screen is an N, although we ‘see’ a different thing, an H. In other words, we are ordinarily at least as ready to identify the intentional object with the real object (even when, as it were, they differ) as we are to take talk of the intentional object of a representation to be about the representation, rather than about the real thing purportedly represented. An ontology based on the former rather than the latter, however, has traditionally faced the need to explain how the same thing can exist both in the perceiver’s mind and in the world; how, if it does, it can be different in one from the way it is in the other; and how some things manage to enjoy only existence in the mind.

II

Idealism Today. Idealism, if not the dirty word itself, has a powerful positive influence on present-day philosophy in more or, indeed, less subtle ways. Few are happy either with the notion of unknowable things in themselves or with outright denial of their existence, but not many are prepared to envisage the notion of access to reality otherwise than through the medium of a conceptual scheme. Hilary Putnam only expresses widely received wisdom when he asserts, ‘Kant... taught us that the whole idea of comparing our conceptual system with a world of things-in-themselves ... is incoherent.’10 Davidson explicitly embraces just the same (as they might be called) ‘two dogmas of idealism’ as Burthogge: first, that the idea of a confrontation between beliefs

and reality to test the truth of the beliefs is absurd; and, secondly, that the pursuit of coherence among our beliefs is the only way in which we can justify them.\textsuperscript{11} If the senses now get less credit, or blame, for shaping our conceptions than they once did, that is partly because many have decided that language is the prime bearer or medium of intentional content. At the extreme, the senses are accorded a merely causal role, as belief-producing mechanisms. Alternatively, it is held, often with acknowledgement to Kant, that perceptual content is itself shaped by a scheme of concepts as a necessary condition of its being intentional content, and of sense experience's being experience of objects. A massively influential idea (strongly foreshadowed in early idealism) is that it is linguistic structure that gives us our objects, since every object of reference falls into a linguistically determined category. The place of a term in language as a whole, it is held, determines the identity-conditions of objects it denotes. Putnam writes with reason as well as approval, 'This idea— that objects and reference arise out of discourse rather than being prior to discourse—is rather widespread in twentieth-century philosophy, in both its analytic and “continental” varieties.'\textsuperscript{12} His own affirmation, “Objects” do not exist independently of conceptual schemes, is only a little less circumspect than many other versions of the same general theory of individuation or identity.

If language and our conceptual scheme (or schemes) do so much, what is left for experience of the world, let alone the world itself, to contribute to our world-view or conceptual scheme? How can our ways of thinking of the world be to any degree based on the world, if our access to the world is shaped so thoroughly by those very ways of thinking of the world? A widely accepted answer to this question is that the world, through sense experience, puts pressure on our world-view as a whole, analogously (or more than analogously) to the way observations put pressure on a high-level physical theory, and can lead to its modification or replacement. Reality, through sense experience,


retains this role, and that, it is widely felt, is realism enough.\textsuperscript{13} Our best apprehension of reality, it is assumed, lies with whatever theories are currently surviving such pressure. The notion of what reality is like ‘in itself’ can function legitimately, at best, only as the regulatory notion of that account we would give of the world, as Peirce put it, ‘if scientific enquiry went on long enough’. At that ideal point, whatever ‘is arbitrary and individual in thought’ would have been filtered out, and our description would be determined as far as is possible by reality.

Bernard Williams, citing and exploring this Peircean thought,\textsuperscript{14} argues that a description or theory can pretend to such ‘absolute’ status only in so far as it retains within it, and explains, the purportedly more subjective or relative views of reality that it replaces. Seventeenth-century philosophical mechanism supplies an example of such retention, since its advocates, in excluding colours from the physical world, offered an explanation of the ordinary view of things as coloured. Similarly, a conception of the world that represents a rejected conception as culturally determined must include an understanding of that cultural determination, and it must also account for its own possibility, as free from such determination. Yet building such conditions into the notion of an ‘absolute’ description of the world, as Williams notes,\textsuperscript{15} presupposes a lot that fundamental physics passes over (but which, it also needs saying, we know already): that there are human beings who have certain conscious experiences, have colour vision, engage in rational enquiry, conduct experiments, are subject to various non-rational social influences, and the like. Consequently, if Williams’s thesis (on this reading of it) is right, it seems that a rather simple, popular model for what constitutes approach to a last, best world-view, the model of one physical theory’s being replaced by another, more widely explanatory theory, is seriously inadequate. So too, by the same token, is the consonant idea that only a description solely in terms of the correct highest-level (or most fundamental) physical theory could

\textsuperscript{13} There is a problem as to how sense experience could put pressure on any theory or world-view if it lacked determinate content independent of that theory, which is perhaps one motive for the view that the pressure is purely causal.

\textsuperscript{14} Descartes: the Project of Pure Enquiry (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), pp. 244-6.

\textsuperscript{15} Cf. idem, pp. 300ff.
count as a description of things as they are ‘absolutely’, or ‘in themselves’. The ladder by which we climb to the physical theory is a necessary part of the new world-view: it cannot be kicked away, and that not just for pragmatic reasons.

Here, at any rate, we may see one important way in which an essentially idealist position can nevertheless pass as realist. Indeed, we may see how one popular form of idealism and one popular form of realism have tended strangely to converge and even to merge in recent philosophy. For the thought that a description of the world in terms of physical theory is the best available candidate for the status of an account of things as they are ‘in reality’ is not essentially idealist, but is characteristic of what is sometimes called ‘scientific realism’, a form of realism with Descartes as direct and obvious ancestor. A ‘scientific realist’, faced with the question whether sense experience has real objects, or is of a real world, may reply affirmatively, but argue that its objects are not the material objects we ordinarily and uncritically suppose we perceive. Roughly, it is held that the objects of sense experience, those objects belief in the existence of which is fully grounded by sense experience, are those entities posited in the ultimately best scientific explanation of sense experience. Those are the objects that are really out there, the real external source of experience. Our best judgement as to what they are lies with current physical theory, but the epistemic gap will only be bridged by an inference to that last, best scientific hypothesis.

Apparently very similar philosophical positions may thus be reached by very different paths: on the one hand, via an essentially idealist epistemology, which restricts the objects of knowledge to a world shaped by our conceptions and theories; and, on the other hand, via an essentially realist concern with what is ultimately, independently there to be known, with things as they are in themselves. In abstraction from these different philosophical motivations and essentially different views of what ontology is, the difference between Peircean scientific idealism and ‘scientific realism’ may seem at most a matter of intonation or inflection, the difference between relaxed and intense talk of ‘positing’, of ‘reality’ and, perhaps, of truth. Williams’s argument, however, prompts a line of criticism of both views. Physics is, of course, explanatory, and has greatly increased our understanding of how
things are, but the knowledge and understanding that physics gives us presuppose, and are embedded in, a less abstract knowledge or, as it were, meta-knowledge of the phenomena, including the conditions and phenomenology of physical observation and enquiry. For one thing, unless ordinary experience gave us some knowledge, however coarse, of things as they are in themselves, that is, of real or independent physical structure, we could not take science, as we surely should, to be extending or refining that knowledge by explaining just those coarsely apprehended features of the world: for example, the readings on a metre, or the physical coherence and continuity of a perceived body. Moreover, the models employed in the ontological interpretation of physical theory extrapolate conceptually from how things are experienced as being, so that the ontological status of the postulates of fundamental physics is liable to be significantly more problematic than the status of human observers, of perceptual experience itself, and of the physical objects with which we are perceptually acquainted. That scientific progress is possible depends on the independent reality of the sensible world, but the move away from experience to abstract theory takes us into a realm in which ontology is liable to depend more on our ways of conceiving of the world and less on the world itself, rather than the other way about. That is one source of the attraction, for the neo-idealists, of the argument that ordinary perceptual or experiential knowledge of the world is itself theoretical (‘folk-theoretical’), as if material things were not given or presented in experience, but were the ‘posits’ of a primitive theory that is either hard-wired in us, or just the first natural product of stimulated sense organs. Intentionality, on that view, is ‘theoretical’ all the way down, and second theories are better than first.

These critical comments presuppose, of course, that sense experience, and its relation to its objects, is not like that at all. It is time to consider a different form of realism.

III
Direct Realism Today. Whereas idealism responds to the Cartesian gap by claiming that the perceived (or, at least, conceived) world may after all be a satisfactory object of science, direct realism purports to avoid the conception of things as they are perceived, or ideas taken objectively, on which both the notion
of a gap and idealism are based. In itself, however, the direct realist's identification of the object-as-perceived with the object-as-it-is-in-reality is as mundane a move as the identification of a person in a portrait with the sitter. What makes 'direct realism' a philosophical position is, above all, what it denies.

As recently propounded, the argument for direct realism proposes a 'disjunctive analysis' of sensory states. With respect to normal perception, it is held, the great mistake is to think that normal perceptual states can be assigned content without regard to the existence of the objects perceived. If I see a horse, the object of my perceptual state is that particular horse out there—it is to that horse that I am visually related. It is not possible to identify and give an account of an internal, non-relational mental content in abstraction from that horse, an intrinsic content that might be common to this visual state, the visual state of another subject seeing a closely similar animal, and a hallucinatory state. The horse itself enters into the content of my perception—even if it is misperceived as a sheep. With respect to hallucinatory states or the like, which have no objects, but to which we ascribe quasi-objects (snakes, pink rats, after-images or whatever), such ascription of content calls for a different analysis: it comes down to saying that it is for the subject merely as if such or such things were perceived. The possibility of assigning perceptual 'objects' that do not exist is thus properly presented as parasitic on the straightforward case of perception of unproblematic objects. What is not acceptable, on this view, is an analysis which first purports to identify non-disjunctively the class of mental states in which there appear to a subject to be objects or states of affairs, and which then offers a definition of perception or perceptual knowledge by adding some further condition to the condition that such a state exists: for example, the condition that a real state of affairs exists which is both in conformity with the given perceptual state and causes that state in some 'non-deviant' way. Such a misguided analysis, it may be suggested, assumes the Cartesian gap and encourages scepticism by promoting the thought that, in order to have knowledge, the perceiver requires reason to believe that this additional condition is fulfilled.16

It is surely right that the notion of a sense experience or sensory state with content is not prior to the notion of the perception of things or states of affairs, any more than the notion of belief is prior to the notion of knowledge. Yet the direct realist argument, as expounded, is a less than sure prophylactic against scepticism, since it leaves room for mental states of the allegedly distinct logical types, perceptual and hallucinatory, that are subjectively (indeed, physiologically) indistinguishable: e.g., one’s seeing an elephant, and its being merely as if one were seeing an elephant. The analogy with belief and knowledge, moreover, suggests that there is not all that much wrong with the idea that we can consider how things appear to a subject without regard to what, if anything, the subject is actually perceiving. As there can be true and false beliefs, some of the former constituting knowledge, so, it seems, there can be veridical and falsidical perceptual states, some, perhaps all, of the former,\(^\text{17}\) and some of the latter,\(^\text{18}\) constituting perception. Attempts to specify the class in question in each case may not issue in reductive analyses, but seem a legitimate way of exploring conceptual relationships.

Here direct realists will argue that belief-contents too owe their identity to achieved reference to things and properties in the world. Beliefs, or quasi-beliefs, that fail to embody such reference call for a different explanation from a logical point of view. Yet, even if the belief that St Michael is an Archangel lacks the kind of determinate content possessed by the belief that Red Rum was a race-horse (supposing that neither St Michael nor Archangels exist), it is not contentless and it is a belief, and the present point is simply that an interest in what a subject believes or thinks, or in the content of her sensory or perceptual states, may simply be an interest in the intrinsic state of the subject, how it is with her without regard to what lies outside her, in particular without regard to whether the supposed or seeming objects of her beliefs or sensory states exist. Of course, this content is, as it were, outreaching (‘intentional’): the subject’s perceptual states present the world, correctly or incorrectly, as being certain ways around her.

\(^{17}\) All, since objects are presented as being seen, touched, etc., so that a sensory state appropriate to an existent object’s being perceived from where I am, if caused in some other way, will be falsidical.

\(^{18}\) Since to misperceive an object is to perceive it.
The language for giving an account of such content will accordingly be language ordinarily employed to describe the world, and will owe its meaning to that primary employment. That point is not in conflict with a ‘Cartesian’ ontological stance with respect to intentional objects. That reference contributes to content and meaning does not entail that we cannot consider a thought or perceptual state with respect to its content in abstraction from its reference, any more than the fact that the representative content of pictures depends on complex relations they bear to other things makes it impossible to discuss the content of a picture in abstraction from its actual object, or from the question whether it has one. There are, of course, deep differences between experiences and pictures, but they do not weaken that point.

I suggested that Descartes’s ontology of intentional objects picks up one element in the way we ordinarily deal with intentionality, while neglecting another. The direct realist does the same, conversely. Whereas Descartes separates off intentional from real objects, ‘immediately’ from ‘mediately’ perceived objects, present-day direct realists keep intentional objects apart from what in perception is intrinsic to the perceiver, in accordance with a strongly externalist explanation of content. But to allow that for the subject a hallucination may be just as if she perceived that $p$ is in effect to admit that intentional contents do after all very properly figure in accounts of how it is with (indeed, in) the subject, regardless of how it is with the world. In other words, as I began by suggesting, we ordinarily move around within the language mapped by the scholastic-Cartesian schema, sometimes taking (as it were) the direct realist stance, sometimes the ‘Cartesian’ stance, and that is how we deal conceptually with intentionality. To prohibit the latter stance in pursuit of a prophylactic against scepticism and idealism is, I believe, just as misguided as prohibiting the former for the sake of a consistent ontology. What needs to be explained is what it is about cognition and representation that allows this flexible, seemingly incoherent conceptual structure to work so well—indeed, renders it indispensable. And that is what externalist analyses signally fail to do.

An extreme externalism about content might involve such a view as the following: to say, in the case of hallucination, that it is for $S$ as if she perceived that $p$ is not to ascribe a contentful
state to S, but is simply to say that S is in the same intrinsic (say, physiological) state\textsuperscript{19} as she would have been in if she had perceived that p, although the external conditions of a contentful perceptual state are not present. The case is analogous, on this view, to someone’s describing the shape of a rock as being as if the rock were a representation of a praying nun. On such an account, all forms of intentionality are straightforwardly relational, not only those, such as the intentionality of pictures or sentences, which are parasitic on the intentionality of thoughts and experiences: in effect, my perceiving the sun is judged as purely a relational property of me as being perceived by me is a relational property of the sun.\textsuperscript{20} The validity of the ‘Cartesian stance’ and the perennial attraction of scepticism of the senses ultimately rest on the (as it seems to me, glaring) falsehood of that proposal: that is, on the essential role of intrinsically contentful subjectivity or consciousness in cognition. What gives a picture or certain sounds or marks content lies entirely outside the picture or sentence. Pace radical ‘interpretationism’, that is not true of consciousness, or of perceptual states in particular. My perception of an object is indeed a relation between me and the object, but virtually everything that makes that relation hold lies within me, in complex mental capacities and their contentful exercise, the latter including conscious, contentful perceptual states. The object has only to be what it physically is, causing its characteristic ripples in its environment.\textsuperscript{21}

Friends of the ‘disjunctive analysis’, however, often argue from the standpoint of a mitigated externalism which emphasises the immediacy of our cognitive contact with the objects of sense experience. Essentially, we perceive that this is thus:\textsuperscript{22} such demonstrative content is the content of the conscious experience for the subject. How, then, can the content of an experience be considered, in Cartesian style, in abstraction from the world?

Yet, as language allows and common practice (not to speak of sceptical argument) demonstrates, it is certainly possible to consider the content of any experience while bracketing off its actual objects, even when it is not in fact possible to doubt that it has them, i.e. to doubt that it does possess full ‘demonstrative content’. The compelling immediacy of our perceptual and agent relationship to the world is one thing, the (if I may so call it) misguided pedantry that postulates a logical barrier to our even considering the theoretical possibility of this experience’s lacking its object is quite another (not to speak of our genuinely wondering, like Macbeth, whether this object is real). It is not logic, or successful reference, that puts us in perceptual contact with the world.

IV

Another Kind of Realism. That compelling immediacy, the way things are sensorily given to us as we grapple with the world, the way we are acquainted with things as in our environment, should be held on to, but it leads away from the emphasis on logic and language towards phenomenology, towards consideration of just what is in fact presented to us from here, and how—of just what experience is like. Here, I think, another question can be raised about a feature of recent ‘direct realist’ theory. For an insistence on our ‘openness’ to the world in experience is commonly coupled with the thesis that experience is ‘conceptual’. Demonstrative immediacy is supposed to be incorporated into the conceptual content of experience through demonstrative reference and ‘demonstrative concepts’. But ‘demonstrative concepts’, it is assumed, pick out objects, properties, events or whatever in virtue, not only of that openness to the world, but also of their place in a scheme of concepts or world-view. Conceptual structure gives us the possible objects of experience, shapes experience into experience of objects and even, it is supposed, makes perceptual self-awareness possible. Yet that is just the model that is characteristic, indeed constitutive, of the idealism from which it derives.

But is anything wrong with the model? Is it not an established philosophical fact that the discrimination, individuation, counting of objects always depend on concepts which draw lines, determine for us when we have the same entity again and when
another, and the class of entities to be counted? Is it not just right that the solution to our epistemological worries should combine the insights of realism and idealism? I do not think so, for reasons which I can only mention now.

First, the idea that perceptual or aesthetic content could be conceptual, in the sense that the content of an experience could be propositional, with the implication that some description, more or less long, could exhaustively express how the world is perceived from here, I find a deeply unattractive view of the relation between language and experienced reality, between description and descriptum. It can help towards understanding this relation, I believe, to reflect on different ways of communicating content: pictorial content is parasitic on visual content, and propositional content is notoriously incommensurable with the former. No picture, as the later Wittgenstein stressed, could be such as to convey all and only what a sentence can convey. To bring ‘demonstrative concepts’ to the rescue of the conceptualist thesis is to offer in explanation of perceptual content what employs the very thing to be explained. ‘Demonstrative content’ is a mixture of conceptual and aesthetic content: what the conceptual element picks out—that shade, that speed, that hairstyle—is not a discrete element of what is perceived, of the content of the sense experience so exploited, as it may be of the demonstrative propositional thought so achieved.23 Both attentional and recognitional capacities (which higher animals also have) are surely necessary conditions of the acquisition of concepts, of grasping what words can capture, but they do not hew or mould experiential content into determinate, concept-shaped blocks ready for the capturing, still less require conceptual schemes to make their exercise possible. Nor are the blocks already there to be picked out, as Lockean simple ideas were supposedly picked out by abstraction.

Secondly, if perceptual content is not conceptually structured, that does not mean that it lacks structure, that the world as perceived is unstructured. The structure of the perceived world is not a matter of conceptual or even nomological relations between

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23. Not that such ‘demonstrative concepts’ achieve full conceptual determinacy, since, e.g., ‘a leaf that shape’ leaves it indeterminate how like in shape a leaf must be in order to be that shape; i.e., they suffer from the general indeterminacy of resemblance, not the same as vagueness.
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entities of this logical type and that—things, qualities, events, tropes, relations or the like—but is physical structure in the most literal sense, the sense in which a house has a structure. Our integrated perceptual and agent capacities enable us to interact effectively with our environment most fundamentally because, whatever other discriminations are possible, in the sense experience involved in that interaction we are presented with structural features of the world, chunks and masses of matter variously disposed around us. Why some perceptible matter is liquid, some gaseous or whatever, while some holds together in discrete, unitary bodies many of which share complex structures and life-histories is all open to further physical exploration. Physics can bring surprises, but, as was suggested above, the speculative, inherently, perhaps irremediably problematic ontology of fundamental physics is not an alternative to the perceived physical structure of the world that it is a task of physics to explain. Dogs, palm trees and even lumps of lead, not to speak of scientists and philosophers, all deserve better than that.

Thirdly, conceptualist theory of identity, one of the most entrenched philosophical inheritances of both the corpuscularian vision and idealism, suffers not only from inherent liability to paradox, but from a failure to explain fundamental features of natural language rather nicely marked by the Aristotelian logical theory it replaced. These relate to the role of material objects—'bodies'—as the primitive individuals of natural language, and hinge on sweeping differences between bodies and other types of entity with respect to classification and individuation. Roughly, but crucially, in the case of bodies both are 'bottom up', from individuals; in the case of entities in other categories both are 'top down', from general concepts. The difference has many ramifications, but one Aristotelian marker is the principle that there are no ultimate species or individuals in categories other than substance. The obvious and, it seems to me, only available explanation of this difference is that individuals in the category of substance are both naturally so and perceptually 'given', whereas in other categories individuation is concept-relative. I will not here add to what I have written elsewhere about this difference and its significance. My present point concerns only its deep consonance with the thought that in sense perception we are presented, pre-theoretically and pre-conceptually, with the
real, physical, independent structure of the world, and our own (of course, physical) place in it. A given feature of this perceived structure is our own status, and that of many other perceived objects, as materially discrete and unitary bodies. These are the primitive individuals of natural language. Our core ‘scheme of concepts’ comes into being as it were shaped around, or incorpo-rating, this pre-conceptually experienced physical structure, which includes the distinction between ourselves and other things.

This, then, is the step that a realist ought to take. In contrast, ‘direct realism’ in its currently popular form is a cosmetic exercise, the unnecessary deployment of a paradoxically relational conception of mentality. Realism tout court, I would suggest, should be the view that reality structures experience and so thought. We are that closely in touch with it. The supposed problem of comparing ‘conceptual scheme’ with reality does not arise, but for nothing like the usually given, fundamentally idealist reasons.