Reality in Common Sense: Reflections on Realism and Anti-Realism from a ‘Common Sense Naturalist’ Perspective

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1. The Question of the External World

[T]he wisdom of philosophy is set in opposition to the common sense of mankind. The first pretends to demonstrate ... that there can be no such thing as a material world; that sun, moon, stars, and earth ... are, and can be nothing else, but sensations in the mind ... The last can conceive no otherwise of this opinion, than as a kind of metaphysical lunacy, and concludes that too much learning is apt to make men mad ... This opposition betwixt philosophy and common sense, is apt to have a very unhappy influence upon the philosopher himself ... He considers himself and the rest of his species, as born under a necessity of believing ten thousand absurdities and contradictions ...

If this is wisdom, let me be deluded with the vulgar.

– Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*

*Skeptical anti-realism and the question of common sense*

Philosophy has always had a complicated relationship with common sense. For instance, the idea at the center of the intellectual revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was that the authority of tradition and custom should be overthrown in favor of the allegedly more truth-reliable authority of reason. All manner of inherited ideas and in particular, common sense, the views of the “vulgar,” were to


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be swept away in the rationalistic spirit of scientific enquiry; the forces of convention conquered by the armies of truth.2

In philosophy, the greatest clash between this newer, supposedly more rational viewpoint and the vulgar one came with regard to the understanding of our perception of physical objects. On the common sense view of perception, it was (and still is) believed that when we see a material object, such as a tree, we are involved in a direct engagement with something that exists independently of our minds. But on the purportedly more rational understanding of the perceptual process, when we see a tree, we are not directly engaged with an external object at all; rather, we are directly engaged with an internal object, a “tree-ish” sense-datum, which represents the external object. And by the way, continues this allegedly more rational view, the external object has none of the properties possessed by its representation. It is a proverbial apple represented by a proverbial orange.3

This would not be the story of a complicated relationship, however, if the vulgar and their common sense way of thinking about the physical world did not have their defenders. They did, notably, in the distinguished characters of David Hume and Thomas Reid; and, as if to make their task easier, Bishop George Berkeley had already demonstrated the wrongheadedness of the new, supposedly more rational view of things. In Berkeley’s philosophy, physical objects are nothing more than internal objects of the mind,4 and Hume and Reid both understood that this view is unimpeachable, if one accepts the indirect-realist conception of perception, known in those days as ‘the theory of ideas’. For once we accept the notion that we are only in direct contact with our own ideas, it becomes impossible to validly infer the existence of anything beyond those ideas.5 The inevitable

3. This is just the primary/secondary quality distinction, introduced (though not by name) in Meditation Two of Descartes’ Meditations on First Philosophy and developed (and named as such) by John Locke in the Essay Concerning Human Understanding.
outcome, then, of the “more rational” view of the issue, was a complete and total skepticism, the further result of which was a corresponding anti-realism about the external world.

Now, Reid’s defense of common sense, his siding with the vulgar against the philosophers, is quite straightforward, while Hume’s is more circumspect and less immediately obvious. Reid defends the vulgar point of view by arguing that the theory of ideas, upon which the philosophical position is grounded, is mistaken; he thus offers what is, in essence, a *philosophical* defense of common sense. Hume, on the other hand, appears to advocate the theory of ideas and accept its anti-realist consequences. But he is also acutely aware of the *natural force* of the vulgar view of the physical world; indeed, such is the force of this view that even the philosopher inevitably returns to it, when he ceases to be engaged in philosophical investigation.\(^6\) Thus, Hume paints a picture of two conflicting ways of thinking about the subject, the philosophical and the commonsensical, with the commonsensical always winning out at the end of the day.\(^7\)

This does not, in itself, constitute a proper defense of the vulgar view of our perception of physical objects; it speaks only to the inevitable *success* of that view over its philosophical rival.\(^8\) At this point, then, it is not clear what Hume and Reid have in common, other than that they agree that the common sense view of the world is *psychologically* irresistible. But if we take into account Hume’s metaphilosophy, his kinship with Reid – and what is commonly called ‘Scottish Naturalism’ – may come into clearer focus.\(^9\) For in examining his metaphilosophy, we can see Hume’s acceptance of the theory of ideas as only *provisional*, its purpose to set up the

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8. In “Of Scepticism with Regard to the Senses,” Hume refers to the philosophical position as a “monstrous offspring,” indicating that he thinks it much worse than the vulgar position. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Bk. 1, part iv, sec. 2 (p. 215).

9. Ironically, our understanding of Hume’s naturalism was *obstructed* by Reid’s interpretation of Hume as an empiricist and a skeptic. This interpretation was dominant until the appearance of Norman Kemp Smith’s, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1941), after which the naturalistic reading of Hume increasingly gained credibility. See H.O. Mounce, *Hume’s Naturalism* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 1–5.
philosophical view of the world (at least as it stood in Enlightenment Rationalism and Empiricism) for a reductio ad absurdum.\(^{10}\)

Both Hume and Reid view skeptical conclusions as a sign of defect in the manner in which we have conducted our inquiries. Importantly, they view that defect in a nearly identical way: when skepticism is the outcome of a particular line of inquiry, it is a sign that we have pushed rational investigation too far and failed to respect the natural boundaries of common sense. For both Hume and Reid understood that in order for rational investigation to be possible, there must be grounds, or, to use more contemporary terminology, a framework, upon and within which the investigation can proceed; this framework consists, in large part, of our commonsensical beliefs about the most basic features of reality – that there is a necessary connection between cause and effect, that the future will be like the past, and that physical objects have continued and distinct existence. But if such a ground or framework is necessary for the possibility of rational investigation, then it cannot itself be rationally investigated. And it is precisely when we push rational investigation to the very framework which makes that investigation possible, that we come to skeptical – and, with regard to our current subject, anti-realist – conclusions:

[T]he first principles of natural philosophy are of a quite different nature from mathematical axioms: they have not the same kind of evidence, nor are they necessary truths . . . [Y]et . . . every man of common understanding readily assents to them . . .

[M]any . . . have lost much labour, by not distinguishing things which require proof, from things which . . . do not admit of proof. When men attempt to deduce such self-evident principles from others . . . they always fall into inconclusive reasoning.\(^{11}\)

10. Suffice it to say here that there have been several powerful strains of Hume interpretation regarding the apparent contradiction between what seem to be, on the one hand, empiricist-skeptical positions in Hume and, on the other hand, what appears to be a naturalistic-commonsensical metaphilosophy. Two of these interpretations take Hume’s thought to be genuinely contradictory: they differ simply as to whether it is the empiricism-skepticism or the naturalism-commonsense-philosophy that is to be taken as dominant. The third way of looking at Hume takes the contradiction to be only apparent. On this view, Hume is presenting empiricism and the theory of ideas as the first premises in what will become a reductio ad absurdum proof. The skepticism is simply the absurdity to which the empiricism has been reduced, the naturalism and commonsense philosophy being the ultimate, resulting product. Clearly, I prefer this last interpretation and will assume it throughout my discussion, with full recognition, however, that the whole issue is far from settled.


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This idea that it is essential that we recognize limits and boundaries, which simultaneously constrain our investigative practices while also making them possible, pervades Hume’s remarks on the difference between the sound and unsound pursuit of philosophy and, more generally, of inquiry itself. In the Introduction to the Treatise, he counsels us to push our investigations only to the point where “we have arrived at the utmost extent of human reason,” upon which we should “sit down contented . . . and perceive that we can give no reason for our most general and most refined principles beside our experience of their reality.” In the Enquiry, he reiterates this point with greater emphasis and explicitly makes the connection between the beliefs that constrain inquiry and common sense: these beliefs are provided by nature and constituted by those principles we identify as common sense:

Philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected. But they will never be tempted to go beyond common life, so long as they consider the imperfection of those faculties which they employ, their narrow reach, and their inaccurate operations . . . This narrow limitation . . . of our enquiries, is . . . so reasonable, that it suffices to make the slightest examination into the natural powers of the human mind and to compare them with their objects, in order to recommend it to us. We shall then find what are the proper subjects of science and enquiry.

Thus, it is my view that when we take Hume’s philosophy as a whole, including his metaphilosophy, we do find a substantial defense of common sense. Though it is true that Hume contrasts two points of view, the philosophical, which leads to skeptical anti-realism, and the commonsensical, which leads to realism, it seems quite clear that Hume thinks the philosophical view involves illegitimate investigative conduct. Sound investigation is constrained by what it is possible for human beings to believe and to justify, and this, in turn, is constrained by human nature. Skeptical anti-realism results from pushing investigation beyond these constraints, while common sense realism is the result of honoring them. Though realism cannot be

justified in the way the beliefs internal to our common sense framework are, we nonetheless must be realists if investigation and thus, the justification of the rest of our beliefs, is to be possible at all.

Contemporary anti-realism

It is ironic that this very apparatus of frameworks, which both constrains and makes inquiry possible, and which thus provides us with a response to skeptical anti-realism, has been used to urge a new and more powerful form of anti-realism. This is the anti-realism that results from the idea of the relativity of frameworks, more commonly known in the contemporary literature as ‘conceptual relativity’, and it is the one with which I will be concerned for the rest of this essay.

Neither Hume nor Reid indicates much of an awareness of the functioning of frameworks or of the kind of necessity that they bring to bear upon our epistemic practices. So, while Hume was quite conscious of the sense in which the necessary beliefs of which he spoke marked the boundaries within which rational inquiry could proceed and outside of which it could not, it is not at all clear that he understood either that these beliefs were constitutive of a framework or that in arguing that they are necessary for the possibility of rational inquiry, he was offering what is, essentially, a transcendental argument on their behalf. And though Reid is relatively clear on the idea that the beliefs of common sense play a limiting and regulating role in the process of rational inquiry, he often seems confused as to the character of their necessity, sounding at certain times like a standard foundationalist, while at others like a naturalist of the sort we have been discussing.

It is not until the twentieth century that we get a much clearer articulation of the particulars of the naturalistic message that we have been developing here. In Wittgenstein’s On Certainty, for instance, there is a strong and quite explicit treatment of the epistemological role of frameworks, and of the non-foundational variety of necessity that

14. A rare clue that Hume might have had some inkling of these implications of his philosophy comes in An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, sec. V, part 1 (p. 41).

framework-statements and beliefs (sometimes referred to as ‘hinge propositions’) carry, with regard to the epistemic practices that they make possible. In a complimentary fashion, we come to understand the ontological role of frameworks and, particularly, their consequences with regard to the individuation of classes and of individual objects and events, in the philosophy of W.V.O. Quine, particularly in his *Word and Object* and *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*.16

We must be clear about the connections being claimed here. My assertion is that from Hume to Reid and then through the later Wittgenstein and Quine, we can trace at least one consistent naturalistic theme, comprised of two parts: (i) Our conception of reality and the things we take to exist is, at bottom, a matter of the frameworks or conceptual schemes within which we operate; (ii) these frameworks or conceptual schemes are not themselves grounded in the way that the statements or beliefs within them are.17 It is my view that this variety of naturalism has no anti-realist implications whatsoever; indeed, I will argue that the most appropriate attitude to take in the face of such a naturalism is a realist one.

Philosophical opinion in the twentieth century, however, turned in exactly the opposite direction: the apparatus of frameworks and the apparent possibility of the relativity of frameworks has been thought to entail anti-realism or, at least, some form of what Crispin Wright has called ‘quietism’, the idea that we cannot engage in fruitful metaphysical discourse at all.18 I think it is telling that neither of these positions was ever explicitly espoused either by Wittgenstein or Quine. Instead, it has been in the subsequent development of their treatments of frameworks by Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty and their interpreters, that anti-realism and quietism


17. We must distinguish this form of naturalism, which is shared by the philosophers whom I have mentioned, from another form of naturalism, which is not. This other form is a scientific naturalism, one which is characterized by a physicalist ontology and which privileges the frameworks of physics and chemistry. This is a naturalism espoused by Quine and many of his followers, but not by Hume, Reid or Wittgenstein. On this distinction, see Mounce, *Hume’s Naturalism*, pp. 8–14.

have been taken as the natural offshoots of the apparatus of frameworks. A notable resister of this trend is Donald Davidson, whose views will be essential to my critique of contemporary quietism and anti-realism.

I emphasize the role of the interpreters of these latter philosophers because, with the exception of Goodman, the metaphysical positions of Putnam and Rorty have evolved over time and are often difficult to pin down. As a matter of procedure, then, it will not be my aim to attach the anti-realist and quietist positions to specific philosophers. Instead, using the writings of these philosophers, I will try to articulate the arguments that are typically made on behalf of quietism and anti-realism, from the perspective of conceptual relativity. Again, it will be my assertion that these arguments are mistaken and that the proper metaphysical attitude to take in the face of frameworks is a realist one.

2. Frameworks, Quietism, and Anti-Realism

If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from the frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described. Our universe, so to speak, consists of these ways rather than of a world or of worlds.


*Ontological commitment and the relativity of frameworks*

Frameworks are structures or schemes, comprised of statements and concepts, which define and regulate and thus, make possible, the practices in which we engage. That the apparatus of frameworks has become prominent in philosophy reflects an increasing and converging understanding that most, if not all, the practices we

19. Putnam’s views, in particular, are elusive. Indeed, it seems that he has changed his position once again, in his most recent book, *The Threefold Cord: Mind, Body, and World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), substantially abandoning his opposition to realism and adopting something like the common sense view I will be arguing in this essay. It will take some time for us to digest this “latest Putnam,” and so I will focus on his previous, anti-realist/quietist phase, here.

engage in are essentially *relational* in character and thus cannot be intelligibly characterized in the absence of a specification of a context, a “stage” within or upon which they take place.

The functioning of frameworks is easiest to see in cases of what are transparently social activities. Consider for instance, a sport like tennis. Now it is quite clear that while the playing of tennis consists of bodily movements of various kinds, the movements, taken in and of themselves, do not constitute playing tennis. Mere bodily movements become “tennis-movements,” only when they are performed within the context of a specific framework, consisting of a number of distinctive concepts and rules. These not only define the game, what *counts* as playing tennis (e.g. these movements count as a serve), but are also regulative with regard to legitimate and illegitimate movements *within* the game (e.g. a serve is “in play” if it lands *inside* these boundaries, and is “not in play” if it lands *outside* of them). The framework is thus necessary for the possibility of playing tennis, and we know this, in part, because we can imagine an identical series of bodily movements which, when made in the context of another framework, might constitute an entirely different activity. I can imagine, for example, a culture whose marital ceremonies consist in physical movements perceptually indistinguishable from those that are a part of what we call ‘tennis’.21

There are, of course, many kinds of practices and thus, many kinds of frameworks. Philosophers have been particularly interested in linguistic, epistemic, and ontological practices, and it is with regard to the last of these that the apparatus of frameworks has been thought to lead in the direction of quietism and anti-realism.

In both scientific and ordinary contexts, we are “prone to talk and think about objects,” to put the matter as Quine does.22 Often, though by no means always, the objects we take ourselves to be speaking of are physical objects, and these are commonly thought of as existing *separately* from us. ‘Separately’ is, of course, vague. We do not want to construe it as synonymous with ‘independently’, since

21. This method of identifying the essentially relational character of social activities through thought experiments concerning the possibility of indiscernible counterparts is, of course, most famously associated with Arthur Danto’s remarkable theory of the nature of art, offered in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981).

artefacts exist separately from us, in the yet-undefined-sense that I am thinking of, though they are not independent of us (i.e. they would not exist if we did not). No, the idea of separateness that is so essentially intertwined with our common way of thinking about physical objects is much more akin to the Humean idea of distinct and continued existence.\(^{23}\) It is one that suggests being external to the mind; an idea which, in the Enlightenment, was understood in terms of separateness from perception – the object would continue to exist even if unperceived – and in the contemporary context, is understood in terms of a separateness from thought – the object would continue to exist even if unconceptualized.\(^{24}\) It would be entirely accurate, then, to describe our common way of thinking about physical objects as a realist one, since I can think of no better way of defining ‘realism’ than in terms of the continued and distinct existence, the separateness, of physical objects and the physical world from our minds.

Now, to think and speak of physical objects is clearly to engage in a practice, as we have been using the term. It is, moreover, an umbrella-like practice, insofar as there are any number of venues in which we contemplate and speak of physical objects. Such venues may be found in both ordinary contexts and scientific ones: certainly sport is such a venue, inasmuch as many of the things involved in sport, things like bats and balls, racquets and nets, to mention but a few, are physical objects. Similarly, physiology is such a venue, in that the things involved in physiology, things like cells and tissue, bones and blood, are also physical objects. ‘Venue’, in this context, is just another way of saying ‘practice’, and the point is that the practice of physical object thought and talk is a part of many of the other practices that make up both our ordinary and scientific lives.\(^{25}\)


25. Like many authors, Devitt distinguishes “common sense realism,” according to which ordinary observable objects exist, from “scientific realism,” which claims that the theoretical, unobservable entities postulated by science exist. Ibid., pp. 23–4. I do not make this distinction, because what makes both instances of realism is that they are equally committed to the external or separate existence of the entities of which they speak. It is this understanding of externality or separateness that I am calling our ‘common understanding’ of physical objects, and it is against the idea of externality or separateness that the anti-realists and quietists direct their arguments.

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It is, however, precisely in the recognition that physical object-talk is a practice that the roots of quietism and anti-realism lie. It is when we understand that thinking and speaking of physical objects is a practice and as such, is only intelligible within the context of a framework, that we are forced to take into consideration certain aspects of frameworks and of the practices that they define; and they are aspects which make us question our realist assumptions and ask whether it is even possible to construe physical objects as external or separate, along the lines of our common sense.

After all, it is all very well to speak vaguely, as we have done, about “things that exist separately from our frameworks,” but one immediately wants to know what things? For it would seem that no substantive realism could be satisfied simply with the claim that external objects exist, in the absence of any idea as to which objects exist. And surely, if what we are interested in is the realism that is pervasive in our common understanding, in both ordinary and scientific contexts, no such minimalist or “fig-leaf” realism will do.26 The realism of our common understanding consists in our being convinced of the distinct and continued existence of tables and chairs, cells and tissue, not some generic something. And yet it is in trying to answer this more substantial question, ‘what things exist?’ that quietist and anti-realist thoughts begin to plague our metaphysical consciences.

As Quine has demonstrated, the question ‘what things exist?’ cannot be answered by simply looking at the expressions in our language,27 for in the case of what are grammatically referring expressions, it is as often the case that there is no corresponding object as it is the case that there is one. ‘Sherlock Holmes’, for instance, is a grammatically referring expression—it is a proper name—yet there is no such man. And in the case of types of expressions more ambiguous with regard to the question of reference, predicates for example, whether there is anything to which they refer or not may be equivocal. To say, for example, that a dog “is white” might, on one understanding of logical form, commit us to the existence of whiteness, while on a different understanding it might not.28

26. Ibid., p. 23.
The only way to go about answering our question would seem to be the way that Quine indicates: what exists is whatever must exist for the statements of our best theories to come out true. The choice of an ontology then, reduces to the choice of a theory. But the choice of a theory is not a conclusive affair. There are methodological criteria, by means of which we are supposed to be able to adjudicate amongst competing theories, but it is rarely, if ever, that considerations of methodology yield just one true theory and just one ontology. Typically, there are a multiplicity of theories that are on equally sound methodological and explanatory footing. This means that there are also a multiplicity of potential ontologies, each with a legitimate claim to represent what exists.

Theories, conceptual schemes, or frameworks; whichever manner of speech we choose, we can surely see the problem that they are imagined to pose to our realist sensibilities. The realist is committed to the externality or separateness of physical objects from our minds and, in the contemporary setting, this is supposed to mean that he is committed to their existence separate from our frameworks. But it may now seem unclear what this could possibly mean. For what we say exists would appear to depend, essentially, on the framework. For instance, whether we take rabbits, un-detached rabbit parts, or "rabbity moments" to exist (to use another of Quine's famous examples), depends upon our surrounding framework. If we assume a framework in which the world is divided up into discrete objects in space and have a language supporting a complementary array of referring expressions and logical concepts, we may speak of rabbits existing. But it is also possible to assume a framework that conceives of things in a different way, in which the world is understood as a train of events and for which there is a correspondingly appropriate logical and extra-logical vocabulary. Within the context of this framework, we will speak not of rabbits but of rabbity moments. The question what "really" exists, then, where 'really' implies distinct from any framework, would seem unanswerable, and this speaks to the hard fact of what Quine has called 'ontological relativity'.

29. Ibid., pp. 12–14.
30. Ibid., pp. 17–19.
One of the positions that results from conceptual relativity and stands in opposition to realism is quietism, the view that substantial metaphysical talk is impossible. Of course, this may mean many things. The sense of quietism with which I am concerned here consists in the idea that it is impossible to talk of the external world, if such talk is robustly metaphysical rather than epistemic in tone; there is, in short, no point to talk that looks beyond our frameworks and practices. This brand of quietism is articulated persistently in the works of both Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty.\(^3\)

It is my view that such a quietism does not reflect a truly anti-realist metaphysics. Instead, it involves a combination of fig-leaf realism and a view of frameworks and conceptual schemes that treats them analogously to opaque screens. True contemporary anti-realists tend to think of frameworks and conceptual schemes along the lines of worldmaking (a la Nelson Goodman). They do not typically inveigh against metaphysical talk or urge quietism, and their metaphysics is often inflationary rather than deflationary. Quietists, on the other hand, in insisting that the world cannot be spoken of, give the impression that they think it exists, but is somehow inaccessible. This impression is bolstered by their excessively epistemic treatment of frameworks and their persistence in speaking in terms of things “internal” and “external” to our frameworks and conceptual schemes.

Suppose we were to accept the idea that in some sense there must be a world separate from our frameworks or conceptual schemes; we can see then how our frameworks and conceptual schemes might appear to operate analogously to opaque screens. Since our only means of access to the world is through our conceptualizations of it, it is impossible to have any idea of the world as it is “in itself.” This position, though it entails that we are realists in the “fig-leaf” sense described earlier, also entails that there is no way of (or point to) talking or thinking about the external world, since such a world is beyond any possible reach. Of course, this is precisely the quietist position.

The air of Kantianism here is deliberate, for many of the arguments against “full blown” realism and for quietism are remarkably different from that discussed by Wright in *Truth and Objectivity*.

\(^3\) It should be clear that the sense of ‘quietism’ that I have in mind is somewhat different from that discussed by Wright in *Truth and Objectivity*. 

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reminiscent of Kant. Hilary Putnam, for one, makes his indebtedness to Kant explicit in “Realism with a Human Face,” and repeatedlyformulates his arguments against realism in a way that suggests that it is precisely such a combination of fig-leaf realism and the opaque screen view of conceptual schemes that he has in mind. Consider, for example, the following:

What I am saying, then, is that elements of what we call “language” or “mind” penetrate so deeply into what we call “reality” that the very project of representing ourselves as being “mappers” of something “language-independent” is fatally compromised from the start. Like Relativism, Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere.

Now this might seem somewhat ambiguous, though it must be admitted that locutions like ‘Realism is an impossible attempt to view the world from Nowhere’ certainly suggest the idea there is an external world, though it is one that can only be approached from the point of view of a conceptual scheme. But any potential ambiguity evaporates when we consider Putnam’s remarks on Goodman and his conception of worldmaking:

Part of Goodman’s challenge . . . is to say “Well, if you say that these two ways of talking are both descriptions of the same reality, then describe that reality as it is apart from those ways of talking.” But why should one suppose that reality can be described independent of our descriptions? And why should the fact that reality cannot be described independent of our descriptions lead us to suppose that there are only the descriptions?

The contrast between Putnam and Goodman is important and instructive, for it illustrates the point that quietists tend not to be bona fide anti-realists but rather fig-leaf realists. For Goodman, since there is no external world, separate from our conceptual schemes or frameworks, when we construct such schemes and frameworks, we are literally making worlds. Indeed, so seriously does Goodman take this idea, that in response to criticisms of his Ways of Worldmaking

34. Putnam, “Realism with a Human Face,” p. 3.
35. Ibid., p. 28. [Emphasis in the original]
36. Hilary Putnam, Renewing Philosophy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 122. [Emphasis in the original] On the very next page, Putnam says “This does not mean that reality is hidden or noumenal . . .” I must admit to finding it impossible to imagine how the preceding passage might be interpreted other than as saying that reality is hidden or noumenal.
made by Israel Scheffler,\textsuperscript{37} he claims that even natural objects like stars are constructed by human beings:

We make a star as we make a constellation, by putting its parts together and marking off its boundaries . . . [N]ot all making is a matter of molding mud. The worldmaking mainly in question here is making not with hands but with minds, or rather with languages or other symbol systems. Yet when I say that worlds are made, I mean it literally.\textsuperscript{38}

Those who think this way are not at all allergic to metaphysical discourse. They are more than happy to talk of worlds, how they are made, and what they consist of, and this talk is not particularly epistemic in its tone; indeed, it is robustly metaphysical.\textsuperscript{39} Anti-realist “constructivists” of this kind may even speak of the world as external; they will simply insist that it is made rather than discovered. In short, contemporary anti-realists like Goodman are not quietists.

The insistence that something cannot be spoken about — in the case of the quietist, the external world — would seem to suggest that the thing does exist but is, somehow, inaccessible or undescribable. This is why quietist talk about the world is so epistemic in tone: the issue for him is not that the external world does not exist but that it is unreachable. Rather than speaking of the worlds we create through our frameworks, quietists instead speak of how frameworks limit what we can say and how we can think about the world. Even Richard Rorty, who is more careful than Putnam in purging his discussions of any language suggesting the separate existence of an external world (but who is, at the same time, even more insistent in his quietism), strays into ways of talking that suggest the neo-Kantianism currently under consideration:

There would have been no bank accounts . . . had there been no human societies, whereas there would have been giraffes. But that is not to say that giraffes are part of Reality as It Is in Itself . . . In a wider sense of “social construction,” everything, including giraffes and molecules, is socially constructed, for no vocabulary . . . cuts reality at the joints. Reality has no joints. It just has descriptions — some more socially useful than others.\textsuperscript{40}


\textsuperscript{39} Goodman, \textit{Ways of Worldmaking}, Ch. VI; \textit{Of Mind and Other Matters}, Ch. II.

Undoubtedly the neo-Kantian label is one that both Putnam and Rorty would resist, given their discomfort with the notion of the “thing-in-itself.” But the manner in which both of them reject realism and argue for quietism invites precisely such a reading, while their complementary rejection of the constructivist anti-realism of Goodman makes it difficult to see just what other reading of their work might be possible.

The question that remains is whether or not a quietism grounded in fig-leaf realism is sustainable. Obviously, it is not a position that will be acceptable to the “common sense naturalist” of whom we have spoken and who is interested in the realism that is constitutive of our common understanding; a realism that is committed to the continued and distinct existence of specific objects, not the generic thing-in-itself of the neo-Kantian. But irrespective of our commitments in this regard, the neo-Kantianism that we have been discussing would seem to be unstable in its own right. For it is not at all clear that the notion of an un-conceptualized, “generic” reality is a cogent one.

In The Many Faces of Realism, Putnam invites us to consider a world consisting of three individuals: x1, x2, x3. The question is, how many objects are there? Depending upon one’s framework, one might get one of two answers. According to a “Carnapian” mode of individuation, there are three objects, x1, x2, and x3. But according to a Polish logician, who believes that for two or more objects, there is a further object that is their sum, there are seven objects: x1, x2, x3, x1+x2, x2+x3, x1+x3, and x1+x2+x3.41 Now consider what Putnam says about the realist response to this example of ontological relativity:

Now, the ... metaphysical realist way of dealing with such problems is well known. It is to say that there is a single world (think of this as a piece of dough), which we can slice into pieces in different ways. But this ‘cookie cutter’ metaphor founders on the question, ‘What are the “parts” of this dough?’ If the answer is that 0, x1, x2, x3, x1+x2, x1+x3, x2+x3, x1+x2+x3 are all the different ‘pieces’, then we have not a neutral description but rather a partisan description . . .42

Putnam’s remarks here are reminiscent of Donald Davidson’s point that speaking of a conceptual scheme as something which organizes or divides up reality, presupposes that reality has parts or

42. Ibid., p. 19. [Emphasis in the original]
pieces: “Someone who sets out to organize a closet arranges the things in it. If you are told not to organize the shoes and shirts, but the closet itself, you would be bewildered.” The idea, then, that one can distinguish a conceptual scheme from the thing of which it is a conceptual scheme, where that thing is in a generic state, “waiting” to be conceptualized, assumes an untenable version of the scheme-content distinction that Davidson calls the “third dogma” of empiricism. Putnam’s remarks on the realist’s response to his microworld would seem to imply that he agrees with Davidson that the notion of an un-conceptualized, generic reality is an incoherent one. But as we’ve already seen, precisely this neo-Kantian idea of a generic reality is suggested, if not entailed, by the quietism that Putnam argues for elsewhere in his writings.

That Putnam is conscious of the tension between the arguments for quietism and opposition to realism, is evident in some of his criticisms of Rorty’s brand of quietism. Rorty is fond of arguing for quietism on the grounds that there is no way that we can get “outside” our conceptual schemes; we are stuck “within” them, and this prevents us from determining which schemes correspond to reality and which do not, an ability which Rorty claims is essential to realism. But this way of formulating one’s opposition to realism would appear to presuppose precisely what it seeks to refute. For if the conceptual relativist believes that it is unintelligible to speak of correctly comparing our conceptual schemes with an independent reality, it must be equally unintelligible to speak of the impossibility of comparing our conceptual schemes with such an independent reality. Such talk of impossibility, of being stuck “within” a conceptual scheme, assumes that there is an “outside” of our conceptual schemes (the world), one which it is impossible to reach or to compare with the scheme that we are speaking from “within.” But this is realism, not anti-realism.

44. Ibid., pp. 189–90.

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What of full-blown anti-realism and of worldmaking, then, given that quietism seems to be both concessive to realism and of questionable coherence? It is my view that while anti-realist worldmaking may appear better than fig-leaf realism and quietism, in truth it is even more inconsistent and incoherent than its weaker counterpart.

For Goodman, since no sense can be made of the existence of an external world separate from our frameworks and conceptual schemes, these frameworks and schemes themselves make up the world. Indeed, insofar as there are many such schemes, there are many worlds that we have made. Goodman reaches this conclusion through several arguments: the first, his primary argument, banks on the idea of the incompatibility of various frameworks with one another; the second rests on the already familiar point about there being no framework-neutral conception of the world, from which to compare and contrast these incompatible frameworks; the third involves the notion that the statements of rival conceptual schemes cannot be translated or reduced from one to the other.

The argument from the incompatibility of rival frameworks is clearly Goodman’s main argument against realism and for the idea of worldmaking. Indeed, he sees worldmaking as the solution to the problems arising from framework-incompatibility. The idea is that there are many frameworks which describe the same “facts” and yet do so in incompatible ways. For instance, consider the following pair of statements:

A. The earth stands still.
B. The earth moves.

It would seem obvious that A & B are incompatible, since A contradicts B (and vice versa). Since contradictory statements cannot be true in the same world, Goodman wants to claim that in the case of contradictory truths, each is true in a separate world.48

We will want to protest that there is no need to multiply worlds here; that the contradiction between A & B is only apparent. If we relativize each statement to a framework, we will see that the statements in question are not really contradictory at all:

C. Relative to a geocentric cosmology, the earth stands still.
D. Relative to a heliocentric cosmology, the earth moves.

But Goodman thinks this will not help us. For we must notice that C & D are not simple paraphrases of A & B. A & B make direct claims about the motion of the earth, while C & D are noncommittal on this issue. Only if we add to C & D that the respective frameworks are true do they become statements as to the earth’s motion. But then we are simply left with the incompatibility we had before; only now it is not only an incompatibility of statements, but also of frameworks.49

“Well fine, then,” we may be tempted to say, “The heliocentric framework is true and the geocentric frameworks is false.” But what do we mean by this? If we simply mean that one is better than the other, then Goodman may agree with us. He does, after all, have a complex theory of the rightness and wrongness of frameworks. But if we mean that one is true in the sense that it gets reality right, Goodman claims that this is impossible. There is no “version independent” world against which we can measure our versions. There are just the versions themselves.

Goodman’s conviction as to the genuine incompatibility of frameworks is based not only on the existence of apparently contradictory true statements, but on the further belief that the statements belonging to such frameworks cannot be reduced or translated from one to the other. Thus, his view is not only that rival frameworks are mutually incompatible but that they are incommensurable. His main identified opponent here is the “monopolistic materialist,” who will respond to Goodman’s arguments by saying that either the statements of the conceptual schemes in question must be mutually translatable and, ultimately, reducible to statements of physics or they must be discarded. The possibility of such inter-theoretical translation and reduction, while not getting us “the world as it is in itself,” would at least demonstrate that the multiple frameworks are really all versions (“notational variants”) of a single framework. But, as Goodman points out, such inter-theoretical translations or reductions, if taken as systematic rather than partial, cannot be achieved.50

But what if we take each framework to be a world in itself, rather than alternative versions of a world? On such a view, all appearances of contradiction and incommensurability evaporate. Each framework

49. Ibid., pp. 112–113; Of Mind and Other Matters, p. 30.
50. Ways of Worldmaking, pp. 3–5.
is a world in itself, so the fact that there are statements which are contradictory or incommensurable across frameworks and thus, across worlds, is no problem whatsoever. It is only a violation of logic to say that two contradictory statements are both true in the same world; it is no contradiction to say that they are both true in different worlds.51 This is the way in which, for Goodman, anti-realism and worldmaking provide the solution to the problems of conceptual relativity, incompatibility, and incommensurability.

I want to start with the argument for incommensurability first, because it is the thread which, if pulled, will unravel the entire structure of Goodman’s metaphysical pluralism. If the idea of the incommensurability of conceptual schemes is not sustainable, then the arguments for the deep incompatibility of those frameworks is itself unsustainable. As a result, Goodman’s anti-realism and his conception of worldmaking are unwarranted, and all we are left with is fig-leaf realism and quietism, which we have already discussed and found incoherent. It will then be time to look at the other side of things, and ask whether there is any way to articulate a viable realism.

Goodman’s anti-realism and his idea that conceptual schemes are themselves worlds which we have made, depends essentially on the notion that there are deeply incommensurable conceptual schemes; ‘deeply’ meaning that their statements are neither inter-translatable nor otherwise reducible and thus, the schemes cannot be seen as notational variants or versions of one another. Only if this is the case do anti-realism and worldmaking become viable options. For given that these positions so deeply violate our intuitions and common understanding, it is only if they can be seen as solutions to an intractable problem that they can carry any appeal.

Unfortunately for Goodman, the problem, for which he sees anti-realism and worldmaking as the solutions, is not one of which much sense can be made. Davidson has argued, convincingly, that the notion of rival conceptual schemes, where the schemes are so incommensurable, their statements so mutually untranslatable that they point to anti-realism, is an incoherent one.52 For if the

51. Ibid., p. 31.
statements of another conceptual scheme are untranslatable to those of ours and as a result, the scheme is truly incommensurable with ours, the question then looms, why think that we are dealing with another conceptual scheme at all? This point emerges from Davidson’s work in the theory of interpretation: the only way we can treat someone’s noises or marks as part of a language is if we understand them; but this means that they must be translatable. If they are not translatable and we cannot understand them, why think they constitute a language in the first place?

Of course, if the languages are inter-translatable and the schemes are thus commensurable, then we are not dealing with anything that requires Goodman’s radical solution. For once the specter of the impossibility of translation is gone, worries about incompatibility go too. We are then left with different “analytical hypotheses,” yielding different conceptual schemes and thus, different ontologies. But with these hypotheses in hand, we have what are, in effect, inter-linguistic translation manuals, which permit us to explain one scheme in terms of the other and these render the schemes, in principle, compatible. The problem that remains, then, is merely the one articulated by Quine: in a radical translation situation (i.e. on the basis of nothing but verbal and non-verbal behavior), how do we know which analytical hypothesis is correct and thus, which conceptual scheme and which ontology the speaker in question is working with? But this is not a problem that points either to anti-realism or worldmaking.

The whole thrust of the metaphysical portion of Quine’s indeterminacy thesis is grounded in the idea that the differences in meaning we commonly talk about are not based in any underlying differences in fact. There is no fact of the matter that can determine whether or not I am speaking of rabbits or rabbity moments, because everything that is a rabbit is also a rabbity moment. It is precisely


54. “If you take the total scattered portion of the spatiotemporal world that is made up of rabbits . . . and that which is made up of rabbit stages, you come out with the same scattered portion of the world . . .” Quine, “Ontological Relativity,” p. 32. Also see Word and Object, pp. 52–53.
because it is so easy, given an alternative set of analytical hypotheses, to move from one conceptual scheme to another that it is impossible to determine that one ontology is meant as opposed to the other. It is not that the schemes are so incommensurable that we cannot tell which is meant; rather, it is because they are so commensurable that there is no sense to saying that there is a difference between meaning one as opposed to the other.

But if our conceptual schemes are not, in principle, mutually untranslatable and thus, not incommensurable in the way Goodman intends, then his argument on behalf of anti-realism and worldmaking is without legs on which to stand. We are then left with the view that different conceptual schemes are notational variants of one another, different versions of a common thing, namely, the world. Given that we cannot get “outside” the schemes, we have no choice but to think of the world as it is in itself as bereft of kinds, classes, or objects; as generic. But this involves us with just the fig leaf-realism and quietism that we have already discussed and concluded was simultaneously concessive to realism and incoherent.

3. Reality in Common Sense

[The sceptic] must assent to the principle concerning the existence of body, tho’ he cannot pretend by any arguments of philosophy to maintain its veracity. Nature has not left this to his choice . . . We may well ask, What causes induce us to believe in the existence of body? but ‘tis in vain to ask Whether there be body or not? That

55. Sometimes, Goodman speaks as if it doesn’t really matter if, as a literal matter, we take our frameworks to be worlds themselves or to be different descriptions of a single world:

While we may speak of determining what versions are right as ‘learning about the world’, ‘the world’ supposedly being that which all right versions describe, all we learn about the world is contained in right versions of it; and while the underlying world, bereft of these, need not be denied to those who love it, it is, perhaps on the whole a world well lost.

Shouldn’t we stop speaking of right versions as if each were, or had, its own world, and recognize all as versions of one and the same neutral and underlying world? The world thus regained, as remarked earlier, is a world without kinds or order or motion or rest or pattern – a world not worth fighting for or against.

Ways of Worldmaking, pp. 4 & 20.

56. See section II.2.
is a point, which we must take for granted in all our reasonings.

– David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*  

**[R]**ealism is not a theory. It is not an opinion I hold that there is a world out there. It is rather the framework that is necessary for it to be even possible to hold opinions or theories about . . . things . . . **[R]**ealism is not a claim about the existence of this or that object, but rather a presupposition of the way we understand such claims.


Now that we have wandered, to no avail, through the intellectual wilderness that is contemporary quietism and anti-realism, it is time to see if sense can be made of our common understanding of physical objects. This understanding is a realist one, consisting of the idea that physical objects have continued and distinct existence; are separate from and external to our minds. Can we make something productive out of this common sense realism, while also giving proper place to the role of conceptual schemes and frameworks in metaphysics and ontology?

**A failure to learn the lessons of the past**

What is most striking, in reflecting upon the contemporary quietist and anti-realist arguments, is how familiar they seem, given even a superficial acquaintance with the history of ideas rehearsed in the first part of this essay: what, after all, is the quietist, but a neo-Kantian; the Goodmanian anti-realist, but a neo-Berkeleyan? What is most depressing, on recognizing this familiarity, is how little philosophers seem to have learned from the philosophies of Hume and Reid. To be fair to contemporary philosophers, however, they are lessons that Kant himself failed to learn from his contemporaries. Recall the famous line from the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

> It still remains a scandal to philosophy . . . that the existence of things outside us . . . must be accepted merely on faith, and that, if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by satisfactory proof.

For Kant, the primary imperative, in the wake of Hume’s philosophy, is to demonstrate that external objects exist. That this is

the lesson he takes from Hume evinces a complete misinterpretation of the central arguments found in Hume’s works. In particular, it utterly fails to recognize Hume’s point that to require such proof with regard to our belief in the external world is to misunderstand the nature of human belief and the role that reason plays with respect to it.

Unlike a run-of-the-mill skeptic who, upon discovering that it is impossible to prove that the external world exists, claims that we should stop believing in its existence, it is Hume’s position that we must not — indeed, we cannot — stop believing in the existence of an external world. But, in saying this, Hume is not implying, as Kant indicates, that the belief in the external world is “nothing but an article of faith.” This would suggest a rationalistic attitude on Hume’s part, one which assumes that beliefs not grounded in reason are somehow second-rate. Instead, Hume is making the naturalistic point that not everything can be proven; that belief is prior to reason and thus, prior to justification or to investigation of any kind.

Thus, if Kant had really understood Hume, he would have recognized the folly in trying to prove the existence of the external world. This is why it is somewhat amusing to find Kant insulting Reid’s “common sense” response to Hume, in the Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics. For while Kant is correct in thinking that Reid misunderstands Hume’s intentions (Reid, like Kant, takes Hume to be a skeptic), his mocking of Reid’s common sense philosophy is misguided. If it is heedfulness to Hume’s message that is desired, then Reid’s philosophy of common sense is much more a propos than Kant’s contorted and tortured rationalism. Reid saw the impossibility of bringing all human belief under the scrutiny of reason and thus, took Hume’s lesson to heart, even if he didn’t realize he was doing so. But when Kant says, in light of Hume’s philosophy, that we must find “proof” of the existence of the external world, he is arguing on behalf of something which, according to Hume, is not only impossible, but which makes assumptions about the relationship between belief and reason that betray a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of both.

The point is that this kind of inquiry should have ceased in the wake of Hume and Reid. That Kant failed to comprehend this and continued to inquire after the ultimate justifications of our most basic

60. Immanuel Kant, Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics, tr. and ed., Gary Hatfield (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4:258–260 (pp. 8–10).
beliefs is significant, but not entirely surprising; it would take time for the naturalistic message of the Scottish Enlightenment to seep into the philosophical consciousness. But it is quite surprising to see this kind of inquiry continuing in the twentieth – and now, in the twenty-first – century. And it is impossible not to notice how similar contemporary quietism and anti-realist worldmaking are to the philosophies of Kant and Berkeley. Once we see these similarities, it must become even more obvious that a strong thread of rationalism underlies both contemporary quietism and anti-realism. For these positions, in their rejections of realism, assume that the externality and separateness of physical objects are matters for dispute, to be deemed true or false as the result of rational investigation. But this is exactly the over-extension of reason to fundamental areas of belief that should have ended, had the naturalism of Hume and Reid been heeded.

Frameworks and common sense realism

The idea that there are beliefs or statements, for which questions of justification are to be considered an illegitimate over-extension of reason, pervades the writings of both Hume and Reid. But beyond the articulation of this idea, neither philosopher was particularly clear as to just what kind of non-foundational necessity such beliefs or statements possess. As discussed in I.1–2, Hume may indicate, in places, that he realizes this necessity is of a transcendental variety, but the matter is too unclear for us to confidently attribute such a position to him.

This is why Wittgenstein’s On Certainty is of such immense importance, for in this work Wittgenstein completes the picture started by Hume and Reid, although he never seems to recognize that this is what he is doing. In his application of the apparatus of frameworks to our beliefs and statements concerning the existence of the external world, Wittgenstein makes quite clear the kind of non-

61. Here I distinguish ‘rationalism’, the view that every belief must be subject to rational justification, in order to carry legitimacy, from ‘Rationalism’, a particular Enlightenment version of this view, found in philosophers such as Descartes and Leibniz. On my conception of rationalism, both 17th and 18th century Empiricism and Rationalism are “rationalisms,” standing in contrast with the naturalism of the Scottish Enlightenment.
foundational necessity that such beliefs and statements have. They are necessary in that they are a part of the very framework that makes a whole number of physical object-related practices possible. Thus, just as the concept ‘fault’ is necessary with respect to the game of tennis, in that it is a part of the framework of principles and concepts that make it possible to play the game, the belief that physical objects exist separately and externally from us is a part of the very framework that makes thinking and speaking of physical objects possible. So just as one’s physical movements cannot count as playing tennis, if not performed within the context of a framework that includes faults, one’s thoughts and locutions cannot count as physical object thought and talk, unless taken within the context of a framework that includes the idea that physical objects are external to and separate from us.

Quietists and anti-realists fail to distinguish between the impact that the apparatus of frameworks and conceptual schemes has with regard to matters of ontology and the impact that this apparatus has with regard to our metaphysical attitude. Whether to divide the world up into rabbits or rabbity moments is a matter of ontology; how to think of the nature of the existence of rabbits or rabbity moments is a matter of metaphysical attitude. Realism and anti-realism, being concerned with the nature of the existence of things, are positions concerning metaphysical attitude. Quietists and anti-realists, however, mistakenly think that realism and anti-realism are positions concerning ontology; after all, it is only in thinking this that one could reasonably take the idea of framework-relativity as having any impact on realism whatsoever.

This point is important enough that it deserves an additional moment’s discussion. Whether we speak in a Humean way, of continued and distinct existence, or in Devitt’s terms of independence and existence conditions, or in terms of my “externality” and “separateness,” it is clear that realism is a thesis pertaining to our understanding of the nature of physical objects’ existence; of what characterizes physicality. The realism/anti-realism dispute is not, in any obvious way, a dispute over ontology; over which things exist or over which are the privileged kind-classifications of things. Consider

the debate as it takes place in the Enlightenment: Berkeley does not deny that there are tables and chairs; on this he agrees with the most materialist of his opponents. What he denies is that chairs are extended substances in space; his anti-realism is pitched at the level of how we think about the nature of physical objects’ existence, not at the level of the individuation or classification of objects.

It seems clear that in the contemporary debate between realists and anti-realists, this essential distinction between matters of metaphysical attitude and matters of ontology has gotten muddled. Why otherwise would one think, for example, that the fact that there is a conventional quality to our deciding whether to divide physical existence into discrete objects or into a series of events suggests anything at all about the character of either’s existence? It is perhaps a sign that many recognize that conceptual and ontological relativity have no impact on the issue of the externality and separateness of physical things of any kind, that so many self-described anti-realists slide so easily into quietism. As mentioned above, even Goodman, the arch anti-realist, lapses into quietist locutions.63

The apparatus of frameworks and conceptual schemes shows us that matters of ontology are fundamentally relativistic; whether we speak of rabbits or rabbity moments is a matter of which conceptual scheme we are working with. But the very same apparatus of frameworks and conceptual schemes shows us that the matter of metaphysical attitude, at least with regard to physical objects – and, given the possibility of rabbity moments, events – is not relativistic; whichever scheme we are working with and thus, irrespective of whether we are speaking of rabbits or rabbity moments, so long as we are thinking and speaking of physical objects or events or engaging in any other physical object/event related practice (i.e. sport, physiology, astronomy, etc...), we are limited by the ideas of externality and separateness. For these ideas are a part of the very framework that both constrains and makes possible all the physical object/event related practices that occur within its reach. Most importantly, the ideas of externality and separateness determine how our physicalistic talk is commonly interpreted and thus, understood:

\[\text{External realism is a Background presupposition on the normal understanding of a very large class of utterances ... It is pervasive in ... that it applies to a very large class of utterances; it is essential}\]

63. See fn. 55.
in ... that we cannot preserve normal understanding of these utterances without it. To see that it is pervasive, notice that it applies to a large range of ... utterances such as

Mt. Everest has snow and ice near the summit.
My dog has fleas.
Hydrogen atoms each contain one electron.

[You and I can both understand the utterances above ... in the same way, because we take it for granted that the utterances are about a publicly accessible reality. And this point holds even if the particular references fail ... Even if it turns out that Mt. Everest and hydrogen atoms had never existed, and I never had a dog, all the same, we still understand the utterances as depending for their normal intelligibility on the existence of an external reality.64

Our common language, the common understanding we have with respect to the utterances made in that language, and our broader behavior, non-verbal as well as verbal, all reflect a metaphysical attitude that is realist, through and through. Quietists and anti-realists do not deny that this realist attitude is pervasive, even ubiquitous, but they do purport to demonstrate that it is mistaken and to replace it with an attitude that is not realist about tables and chairs, trees and mountains. What is ironic about this is that their demonstrations of the wrongheadedness of the realist attitude should rely on the apparatus of frameworks, when it is that very apparatus which renders such demonstrations impossible.

It is important, in this regard, to note that quietists and anti-realists alike are unanimous in their desire to preserve ordinary usage with regard to physical object terms like ‘table’, ‘chair’, ‘tree’ and ‘mountain’. Indeed, Rorty, at one point, says, “I have urged that we continue to speak with the vulgar while offering a philosophical gloss on this speech which is different from that offered by the Realist tradition.”65 But how could this possibly be achieved, if one has properly understood Wittgenstein (whom Rorty claims as a major influence) and digested the message of On Certainty? Such an attempt to split the difference between ordinary usage and understanding on the one hand and the metaphysical attitudes that simultaneously


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constrain and make that common usage and understanding possible on the other, ignores the defining and constraining roles that frameworks play, with regard to our ordinary usage and understanding. Those frameworks involve, essentially, the realist attitude; this attitude pervades our ordinary usage and understanding; and as a result, realism cannot be separated from that usage and understanding.

*Philosophy, ordinary experience, and common sense*

If we are to preserve ordinary usage and understanding, with regard to the vast array of physical object and event related practices in which we engage, then Hume, Reid, and Wittgenstein have all demonstrated, in different ways, that quietism and anti-realism are simply not options. Realism is the metaphysical attitude involved in our common and ordinary understanding of physicalistic thought and talk and, as a consequence, thought and talk about physical objects and events cannot proceed without it. The quietist and anti-realist, in attempting to separate realism from physicalistic thought and talk, have failed to take frameworks and their constraining and regulating roles seriously enough. But why not be even more radical than the quietists and anti-realists? Why not agree that the realist attitude is a part of our common understanding and usage, of our “common sense,” but deny that *either* are worth keeping? Why not complete the Enlightenment project and jettison common sense and common usage altogether, in favor of a more philosophically, scientifically, and logically precise way of thinking and speaking, one that is rationalist through and through, in the sense that *nothing* is believed without justification and warrant and in which no terms or concepts are used that imply anything that cannot be rigorously proven?

This idea can be found in some versions of Eliminative Materialism and other Eliminativist programs, and is reminiscent of Logical Positivism. Such programs strike me as far more dangerous (because more threatening) than either quietism or anti-realism. The idea on which they are founded is one for which only a metaphilosophical answer will suffice, an answer which I am not at present prepared to give. I can, however, *point* in the direction of such a metaphilosophy. It is found, first and foremost, in Hume who, better than anyone, articulated the impossibility of any form of
inquiry or theoretical position which involves the inquirer’s or theorist’s escape from his own human nature and from common human life and experience. This is why Hume insisted that “philosophical decisions are nothing but the reflections of common life, methodized and corrected” and that in inquiry, we should never “be tempted to go beyond common life,” so long as we “consider the imperfection of those faculties which [we] employ, their narrow reach, and their inaccurate operations.”

This metaphilosophy can also be seen in Reid’s persistent argument that it is a matter of necessity that there are things which cannot be proven. It is evident in G.E. Moore’s claim that there are things we know with greater certainty than any proofs that can be given either against them or on their behalf. We see it in On Certainty, when Wittgenstein repeatedly points out the weirdness of skeptical attempts to question or contradict the basic principles of our common sense. Of course, he is also pointing to the weirdness of attempts to defend those principles, for both the criticisms and the defenses reflect a rationalism that fails to recognize the priority of belief over reason and reasoning.

Finally, the metaphilosophy I have in mind is very similar to what Stanley Rosen has called ‘Immanentism’ (the opposing position he calls ‘transcendentalism’), articulated as follows:

My thesis is not simply that there is an ordinary language, reflective of the common stratum of human nature . . . I also claim that this ordinary language is retained as a basis . . . of all technical dialects. It is this basis that serves as the fundamental paradigm for the plausibility or implausibility of theoretical discourse and in particular of philosophical doctrines. It is not satisfactory to evaluate philosophical doctrines on purely technical or formal grounds because these grounds cannot establish their own validity or authority . . .

66. See n. 12.
68. This idea consistently hovers just beneath the surface of both Moore’s “A Defence of Common Sense” and “Proof of an External World,” in his Philosophical Papers (New York: MacMillan Co., 1959), although there is fierce debate as to how Moore himself intended his “proofs” for the principles of common sense to be understood.
69. Consider, for example, On Certainty, §257: “If someone said to me that he doubted whether he had a body I should take him to be a half-wit. But I shouldn’t know what it would mean to try to convince him that he had one. And if I had said something, and that had removed his doubt, I should not know how or why.” On the same and related points, see §32, §71–75, §138, §220, §231, and §460–461.
Philosophy is extraordinary speech, but extraordinary speech derives its first and most important level of significance from ordinary experience and everyday life . . .

If philosophy is understood as a thoroughly extraordinary event or activity having nothing to do with ordinary experience . . ., then there is no basis on which to distinguish between genuine and specious philosophical speeches. If philosophy is a radical departure from everyday life, if it claims that ordinary life is an illusion, or an accident of our neurophysiological structure, or the detritus of outmoded scientific theories . . . then philosophy is indistinguishable from poetry or, if you prefer, from arbitrary rhetorical assertions . . . Stated more generally, conceptions of philosophy are feasible if and only if they can be debated in the common language of ordinary experience.70

It is my view that this metaphilosophical battle, between those who believe that the aim of philosophy is to transcend human nature and experience and those who believe that philosophy, indeed, inquiry as a whole, is only possible within the context of human nature and experience, is one of the most fundamental and important battles in human intellectual history. It is a battle that continues today, and it is one in which I have taken a decisive side. But it is a side which, beyond the metaphilosophical impressions of it that I have offered in the last part of this essay, will have to be articulated in greater detail and with more precision at some future time and place.71

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