

Informal notes from 2007, on metaphysical issues of realism and ‘representationalism’

By Chris Wright

[With bracketed later interpolations]

[Also see [these thoughts](#)]

Reading *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*.

In his contribution, Charles Taylor follows Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty in arguing against representationalism, or “a mediational epistemology.” “I mean by that an understanding of the place of mind in a world such that our only knowledge of reality comes through the representations we have formed of it within ourselves.” It’s a picture that presupposes the inner/outer distinction. [Heidegger](#), you’ll recall, argues that we have knowledge of things themselves, not of mere “appearances.” (Shades of Thomas Reid.) –To interject my own opinion here: from the perspective of ordinary common sense, this is true. It’s even a truism. The book I see is the book itself, the thing itself. I see the thing I see, and the thing I see is a book. Moreover, one assumes unreflectively that the book as I see it is mind-independent: it ‘looks’ the same even when I’m not looking at it. But this is nonsensical: when no one is looking at it, it doesn’t have any appearance at all. By definition. But then if it has no appearance in such conditions, its ‘mind-independent’ nature, or its nature ‘in itself,’ obviously differs from how it appears to us. Thus, there is a difference between the book as it is ‘in itself’ and the book as it appears to consciousness. Natural science supports this conclusion, by elucidating the mechanisms through which the brain constructs the appearance of the book. And so we’re back to the representational picture, the mediational epistemology.¹ As Taylor puts it (without agreeing with it), “we grasp what is outside through something inner.” How this picture can be doubted, I have no idea. Taylor’s arguments are confused.

He argues against the idea that “we can understand our grasp of the world as something that is, in principle, separable from what it is a grasp of” (which he thinks is implied by any representationalism or mediational epistemology). Now, of course, the world as we experience it—which is the “world” he’s talking about—is not separable from our “grasp” of it, our experience of it. But this is a tautology. The world as I experience it is not separable from how I experience it; it is not separable from the meanings I bring to it, the way I interpret it, the “bodily know-how” that allows me to get around in it, the nonconceptual ways of being in it, the shared practices that create the spaces in which people interact. But no reasonable “mediational epistemology” would deny any of this. In fact, such an epistemology welcomes it, since this Heideggerian picture is perfectly consistent with the idea that the brain and the body construct the world as we live in it. The world as it is *in itself*, however, is separate from our grasp of it. Obviously. There is a certain

¹ [Was I confusing here causal mediation (the brain’s construction of sense-impressions) with epistemological mediation (which has to do with how to justify one’s knowledge)? Most philosophers would probably say so. But it seems to me that the two are connected. There are “unconscious inferences” going on when the brain presents something to me as a tree or a house or whatever. The brain itself is engaging in ‘epistemological activity’ by synthesizing the abundance of sensory impulses it receives into the image of a tree—for it is *inferring*, so to speak, that what is present is in fact a tree.]

way the world is independently of our experience of it. Before life existed, there was the world in itself. Now that life exists, there is still the world in itself. But we have no direct access to it. Only through scientific tools, the scientific method, can we potentially gain some knowledge of it (in a “scientific realist” sort of way). –What is so difficult about this?

Taylor is both confused and unoriginal. The obvious existence in us of Heideggerian nonconceptual pre-understanding has no implications vis-à-vis any reasonable representationalism. Taylor also seems to think, for some reason, that by attacking atomistic theories of experience, which postulate discrete sense-data, he’s attacking “representationalism.” “Our understanding of the world is holistic from the start... There is no such thing as the single, independent percept. Something has this status only within a wider context that is understood, taken for granted, but for the most part not focused on...” So what? This is nothing but a sound observation about how we experience the world. It has no interesting philosophical implications (although it does tell against Humean psychology). More generally, most of these Heidegger-inspired phenomenological analyses have no noteworthy philosophical ramifications. They just make explicit our prereflective experience of the world, which means that *psychologically* they’re fruitful.

So, Taylor is right that ordinarily “our grasp [or understanding] of things is not something that is in us, over against the world; it lies in the way we are in contact with the world.” (Of course, biologically it is in us, in our brains and nervous systems. But Taylor ignores biology.) He’s right that in this sense there is not a complete disconnection or “dualism” between the subject and the object, since they interact in the same meaningful world (structured by the subject—a (neo-)Kantian point that Taylor doesn’t want to admit). He’s wrong that this has implications with respect to traditional issues like realism or skepticism. The Heideggerian and Wittgensteinian recognition that doubt presupposes a background of understanding, a world which is “the all-englobing locus of my involvements,” doesn’t make Berkeleian idealism incoherent, as Taylor thinks. Berkeley is perfectly aware of the existence of such a world. What he doubts is the existence of a different kind of world, a world of matter outside my immediate experience.

To repeat, natural science postulates a mediational epistemology. (External input makes contact with sensory nerves, which relay the information to the brain, which constructs the experience.) By denying such an epistemology, Taylor is denying science. But he’s also denying to himself that he denies science. The result is an extremely confused man.

Again, it all depends on how you approach the question. From one perspective, to talk about “representations” is superfluous: the things I see are the things I see, not “representations” of the things I see. I see the book itself, and it’s silly or meaningless to say I see a representation of the book. On the other hand, it’s truistic, from a different perspective, that everything I see is an appearance, i.e. a representation, in that it appears to me, I’m “being appeared to.” But these are really two ways of saying the same thing. “The book itself” that I see is obviously something that appears in (or to) consciousness, which means it is an “appearance.” Thus, I perceive appearances, by definition. But the word ‘appearance,’ which implies the subject-object distinction

(the object appears to the subject), also implies, in a different way, that there is an essence, an object in itself. Outside the way things look to consciousness is the way things are in themselves. Science supports this distinction, which means it supports “representationalism.”

How can Taylor even admit talk of perceptions, since ‘the other side’ of a perception is tautologously an appearance, a representation, that which is being perceived by the subject?

Davidson and Rorty oppose representationalism—or think they do. Actually, they oppose the correspondence theory of truth, favoring coherentism (about beliefs). But, as Taylor points out, beliefs are (one form of) representations. So, in a sense, D and R admit that truth has to do with representations; they simply deny that it’s a matter of correspondence between representations and reality, arguing instead that it’s a matter of coherence among the only kind of “representations” that exist, namely beliefs. Perceptions can’t rationally ground beliefs, because “nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief.” But then what is the relation between a perception and a belief? How does the first ground the second? According to Davidson, the grounding is causal, not rational. A given perception (e.g. of my roommate at the kitchen stove) causes me to have a belief (that she is cooking) but doesn’t rationally justify it, because the perception has no propositional content and only something with propositional content can justify something with propositional content (i.e., the belief). In Davidson’s language, “the relation between a sensation and a belief cannot be logical, since sensations are not beliefs or other propositional attitudes.” It can only be causal, then. This view generates absurdities, of course, and violates common sense, inasmuch as any idiot can see that my belief that my roommate is cooking is rationally justified by the sight of my roommate mixing things in a pot on the stove. But Davidson was a professional philosopher, i.e., handicapped, so don’t be too hard on him.² The answer to the question (about how perception can rationally justify belief even though perceptions don’t seem to have propositional content) is that perceptions do in fact have propositional content, “implicitly.” This is shown by the fact that a proposition can unproblematically articulate the ‘content’ of a perception: for instance, my sight of a dog chasing a frisbee can be “re-presented” by saying that the dog is chasing the frisbee. The proposition “unpacks” the conceptual content of the perception (as I said in my college senior thesis). Kant recognized all this. He knew that the brain synthesizes experience conceptually, so that experience has a propositional content and structure, in fact the same structure as language (which explains why, using language, we’re able to do justice to perceptions).

John McDowell agrees with me.

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² He admits that “‘I saw it with my own eyes’ is a legitimate reason for believing there was an elephant in the supermarket. But [he thinks that] this reports no more than that something I saw *caused* me to believe there was an elephant in the supermarket.” Clearly this view is false. Strictly speaking, the term ‘reason’ implies *logical*, not *causal*, justification. (We’re not talking about the biological processes that *caused* me to have the belief. We’re talking about my *justification* for having the belief.) But he has denied that sensations can logically justify beliefs, which means they cannot be *reasons* for beliefs. And that’s stupid.

The whole debate about such concepts as realism, representationalism, etc. is muddled. This is from the Blackwell Dictionary of Philosophy:

There are two types of perceptual realism, direct and indirect realism [sometimes called representationalism]. Both claim that the physical world exists independently of perceivers and that the world is as science says it is. While direct realism believes that what we perceive is the physical world itself, indirect realism argues that what we immediately or directly perceive are sense-data, rather than the physical world itself, which can only be perceived indirectly. Thus, indirect realism sets up a field of sense-data between our perception and the physical world. But it contrasts with phenomenalism, for it denies that physical existents are composed out of sense-data. There are two main versions of indirect realism. One, called naive indirect realism, claims that sense data have all the types of properties that physical objects have. The other, called scientific indirect realism, suggests that physical objects have primary properties, while secondary properties, such as color, smell, and taste, belong only to sense-data. "The dispute between the direct realist and the indirect realist concerns the question of whether we are ever directly aware of the existence and nature of physical objects."

First of all, I should reiterate that the human mind is incapable of getting absolutely clear on this subject. The issue has been alive for millennia and will never be settled. Science has not brought us any closer to a philosophical understanding; it has, in fact, made the problems even more intractable. We know now that the brain constructs experience, constructs our experience of space and time and everything else. It's natural to conclude from this that a person's experience is somehow 'in' the brain, or perhaps 'in' consciousness, and not 'out there' as it seems to be. But let's be careful: what common sense decrees is, on the level of common sense, transparently true. We do perceive physical objects in space and time, and these objects have primary and secondary properties, and everything is more or less as it appears to be. Common sense even has room for certain scientific hypotheses, such as the hypothesis that there are microscopic particles in these objects that we can't normally see. But once you start to ask questions that can't be answered by direct appeal to sensory experience (including experiences made possible by microscopes and so on), the common sense account breaks down and you get philosophical headaches.

On the philosophical level, some such notion as sense-data [or at least *sensory appearance*, *sense-impressions*, as distinguished from actual physical objects] is unavoidable. Two kinds of arguments establish it: purely 'conceptual' ones (like the argument from illusion), which make no reference to scientific theories of perception, and arguments that do make such reference. The significance of the latter is easily graspable. An example of the former is the following: if there are external objects in the world, they are (perhaps by definition) 'public,' perceivable by more than one mind. But one's *experience* of them, one's *perception*, is not public. I alone am aware of my perceptions as I experience them. So my consciousness of the objects in this room is, in a sense,

private (first-personal), which is to say that the objects as they appear to me are private. Their appearances in my consciousness are private. But now we've surreptitiously snuck in so-called sense-data, i.e. the appearances of objects in consciousness (as distinct from the external objects themselves).³ In short, it's necessary to distinguish between objects and their appearances or 'mental representations.'

But remember, for common sense there is no distinguishing between objects and their appearances. What I see is the object itself; to distinguish between it and its "appearance" is otiose. So, on this level, the sensory/perceptual appearances just *are* the external objects, and vice versa.⁴ On a more sophisticated level, though, this isn't true. There's a difference between truly 'mind-external' matter and matter as we experience it. I.e., we have to distinguish between matter in itself and matter as it appears to a mind. The representation in consciousness is not a mere copy of some similar-looking thing in an external world that we don't perceive; it's radically different from matter as it is in itself. Matter is not colored in itself; it doesn't 'objectively' exist in those discrete

³ [I was wrong to equate sense-data with the structured sensory appearances we're aware of. Sense-data are a philosophical construct that's supposed to be more primitive than the sensory manifold that appears to us as objects and so forth. Sense-data are, it seems, supposed to be things like spots of color we see *out of which* the mind constructs the image of a table. This distinction between "sensory appearances (*as* mere appearances, not the physical objects that naïve common sense interprets them as)" and primitive "sense-data" is very subtle, but I think it's worth making. Sorry about the confusion. I should have said something like "sense-impressions" rather than sense-data.]

⁴ That's the element of truth in phenomenism. [Written days later: Unreflective common sense, in not recognizing even the existence of mere sensory appearance as contrasted with independent physical objects, doesn't recognize that the way objects appear to me is, in a sense, private. So the objects one perceives are ordinarily seen to be public, and one is supposed to see the same exact object that others see. Phenomenism is more sophisticated than common sense, in that it admits sense-data. (The "public" objects are actually constructions out of sense-data.) And in doing so, it recognizes that, truthfully, what consciousness has direct access to are private representations, not public objects. I.e., *mental* entities, not material ones. Where it goes wrong is in succumbing to idealism, in declaring that there *is no* matter-in-itself ("outside of experience"). There must be matter; science needs it. But consciousness doesn't have "direct, immediate access" to it, since experience is constructed by the brain. Consciousness has access only to itself and what is 'in' it, i.e. to mental representations. This is just to say that consciousness cannot experience matter in itself, which is a tautology.]

[A major source of confusion in all this is that the ordinary material objects one perceives can be thought of from two different perspectives, the 'commonsensical' one according to which they are public ("material"), and the semi-Berkeleian one according to which they are private representations. The latter is more consistent with science, as long as you admit that matter exists in itself! But the former also has an element of truth, since, after all, the way that objects appear to me is, except in unusual or pathological circumstances, identical to the way they appear to you, which means that objects are in this sense "public," "out there," "independent of me."

[Anyway, the fact that objects can be analyzed in these two ways means that words like 'material' and 'mental' have two different meanings. There is scientific matter-in-itself, and there is matter as we experience it, i.e. as the ordinary objects we perceive all the time. Similarly, on the level of common sense there are thoughts as opposed to ordinary objects—this is the usual sense of 'mental'—but on the level of philosophy even these ordinary objects are 'mental' insofar as one's experience of them is private to oneself. The foregoing discussion has probably confused the reader because of the double meaning of each of these words ('matter' and 'mental').]

forms we call “objects”; it’s even possible that the human sense of time doesn’t apply to it. On the other hand, this notion is peculiar, for our body itself is, after all, part of “matter in itself,” and we can certainly say a lot of coherent things about how the body works “in itself,” i.e. when the mind isn’t directly perceiving its internal operations. But as I said in a journal entry years ago, it seems there are *levels* of the thing in itself (matter in itself), ontological levels distinguished by emergent causal powers. The levels that biology deals with have very different properties from the levels that quantum mechanics deals with. Somehow, space and time in some form comparable to our experience of them emerge as you proceed from the most micro of levels to progressively more macro levels. –The mysteries of philosophy merge with those of science.

The object is public, but my perception of the object is private. This is the source of so many confusions. You can look at basically the same thing in two different ways, as a material object or as an experience (of the object). It’s like one of Husserl’s reductions, I forget which. A wondrously subtle shift in mental attitude changes the thing from material to mental, from public to private! The common-sense attitude, and then the philosophical attitude (invoking sense-impressions, etc.).

First: the object. Second: the object *for me*. First: public, external, material, the same thing for everyone. Second: private, semi-‘internal,’ semi-mental (but still ‘more’ material than thoughts), mine alone. First: Thomas Reid. Second: Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Russell, Ayer. Each view is correct in its own sphere. (Ultimately, though, the Lockean view is the deeper truth, the basic truth of the matter—as long as it doesn’t become Berkeleian or Ayerian. We have to admit the existence of some kind of matter completely external to the mind.)

In asking what matter ‘is’ in itself, what its ‘essence’ is, we’re basically, albeit implicitly, asking what its essential appearance is. We want to imagine it, imagine what it looks like—in itself. (‘What does real, mind-independent, external matter look like?’) But obviously that question contradicts itself: it tacitly presupposes a subject to which matter is appearing at the same time that it imagines away the subject, trying to get at the objective material world as it is in itself. “Essential appearance”? That’s a contradiction in terms!—at least if ‘essential’ is understood in the way it is here. So the very question is misguided (at least as it is commonly, tacitly interpreted). This shows you how hopeless is the human attempt to truly understand the world, how hopelessly in the dark we are. We can’t escape the subjective perspective. (Only formalistically, through mathematics, can we presumably escape it. Hence the truth of structural realism.)

[...]

Okay, I’ve been repeating myself for days now. I’ll stop.

Except, one more thing: G. E. Moore was terribly vexed by all this stuff, torn between his commitment to the idea that what we directly perceive are sense-data and hence not physical surfaces (the surfaces of objects) and his commitment to the idea that we do perceive these surfaces. “I am completely puzzled about the matter,” he said, “and only wish I could see any way

of settling it.” Well, the way of settling it is the one I’ve laid out. The seemingly incompatible positions are both correct—correct on two different “levels” or in different “gestalts.” In the pre-analytical common-sense gestalt, it’s true that we perceive the surfaces of physical objects. In the more philosophical gestalt, this is wrong; we ‘perceive’ only mental representations. But these representations are intuited by us as constituting physical objects—phenomenologically they have the character of being (or of constituting in their totality) external physical objects—so the element of truth in the naïve view is preserved. We perceive what appear to us to be physical objects. And in fact they are physical objects in the sense that they—i.e., these constructions out of mental representations—have the properties of being physical, including divisibility-into-parts, public availability to other consciousnesses, etc. (properties not possessed by mental phenomena).