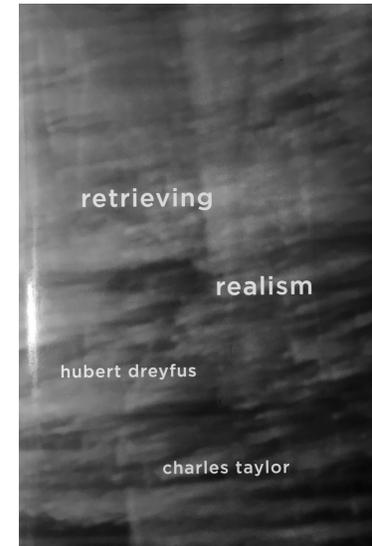


A VIEW FROM SOMEWHERE

In their book, *Retrieving Realism*, which came out only last year, Dreyfus and Taylor presents a comprehensive collection of arguments against what they take to be the mediational picture of epistemology. The book is also a defense of a form of gestalt holism they call pluralistic robust realism. In this essay we will look at how successfully they make their case.

By Dag August Schmedling Dramer & Carl Korsnes



In *Retrieving Realism*, Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, now old school sluggers and professor *emeriti* at their respective universities, join forces in order to clarify phenomenological and epistemological issues in this collegial work. In their book they provide counterarguments against philosophical views that are working inside what they take to be a poorly functioning *epistemological picture* of the human mind and its relation to the world. One of the essential properties of this world picture is the fact that in order to function as a *picture* – the platform from which philosophical investigation is to be initiated – it has to recede into the periphery. From there the submerged picture functions as the unspoken assumptions required for the philosophical problems to emerge as they do. In *Retrieving Realism* Dreyfus and Taylor refer to this picture as the *mediational picture of epistemology*. One of the fundamental, if not *the* fundamental, premise of the book is that this epistemological picture of the world is confusing the philosophical debate. The confusion becomes evident in ontological, epistemological and metaphysical questions.

Dreyfus and Taylor claim that the mediational picture stems from the tradition of Descartes and Locke (and in some sense Kant) and is prevalent in the philosophy of most thinkers today. Their more rebellious claim is that the mediational way of thinking is present even among philosophers who define themselves as objecting to the Cartesian worldview, such as Davidson, Rorty and Searle. What is missing among most thinkers that claim to reject

the Cartesian picture, according to Dreyfus and Taylor, is the acknowledgment of the engaged perspective on the world. Knowledge is not only passive explicit representations. Also through bodily engagement with the world – by responding to things, using them as tools, and moving around them – we can gain knowledge of it. The *disengaged* worldview is still considered to be *the* road to true knowledge, a view that Dreyfus and Taylor opposes.

What the two philosophers want to argue is that the mediational picture still captivates philosophy because it is *taken for granted* as the background of most philosophical debate. The mediational picture – that the internal ideas are mediating the external – is an *epistemological* method that is *ontologized*, they claim. Inspired by philosophers like the early Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the later Ludwig Wittgenstein, they present an alternative to the picture of mediational epistemology. Their alternative can be called the *contact theory* of mind and nature, in which mental and logical *representations* of the world are replaced by actual *presentations* of it. After presenting the mediational model and fleshing out their initial critique of it, they begin to develop the embedding of the human understanding of the world by discussing Merleau-Ponty's and Samuel Todes' ideas, focusing on the view of the *body* as primordial for our perceptions. Heidegger is introduced as the one philosopher that made us aware that our understanding of the world is dependent upon our engagement with things, practices, traditions and other

people. The ideas of Wittgenstein are presented as the linguistic aspect of the contact theory, tying the threads of the contact theory together with his understanding of meaning, language and philosophical problems as dependent upon our embeddedness as *homo loqui* in a linguistic community. Dreyfus and Taylor use what they take to be the “best” ideas of the aforementioned philosophers and build up their own system, starting with the Merleau-Pontyan body of perception, continuing with the Heideggerian view on practical activities and completing the circle with Wittgenstein’s understanding of human language.

The authors articulate the epistemological picture in which they claim post-Cartesian philosophy is trapped, and show us possible means of flight from that picture through a phenomenological investigation. They argue that we naturally check beliefs, not by verification through sentences or truth-statements of a predicative type, but by using our epistemic abilities in the extra-linguistic world, abilities and capabilities based on our bodily engagement with the world. The first five chapters of the book purports to set up a basecamp for the final climb towards the summit of a unique form of realism they call *robust plural realism*. There is in fact a reality that we are experiencing, they argue, but the truths about it may be plural.

There are many ways of perceiving reality, and Dreyfus and Taylor argue that no perspective is fully privileged over others. That said, both Taylor and Dreyfus seem heavily concerned with keeping the authority of the physical sciences intact, i.e. they wish to ensure that their arguments will not end up in any way denouncing or discrediting modern scientific discoveries. But this seems, at first glance, to be counterintuitive: If there are a plurality of equally valid ways of viewing the world that are all true, then why should we hold Newtonian physics in higher regard than Aristotelian physics? Instead of insisting on there being *one* single truth, for instance the scientific truth, the authors argue that several perspectives on reality can be equally true. That is, they can express different truths about an object. Certain views and problems depend on them being taken as *important* and/or *relevant*. Most readers would not object to the influence of whether something is considered important or not, but it does not appear obvious that a *plural realist* view is the natural consequence.

The book can be read as mainly an argumentative presentation of a discussion with the late Richard Rorty, who was both a fan and an opponent of Taylor and Dreyfus’s ideas throughout the years. Rorty is an exponent of *deflationary realism*, the view that even the most objective and scientifically verified empirical findings are reducible

to human practices, languages and understandings. One of the challenges Taylor and Dreyfus perceive is that of separating their pluralistic realism from deflationary realism. The book engages in discussions also with other modern philosophers, such as John McDowell and John Searle. Consequently, the book is characterized by being a result of previous papers and philosophical discussion over several decades. This feature makes the book appear more as a contribution to a debate (or several), and less as an independent work that stands on its own.

Retrieving Realism presents a *gestalt holistic argument*, which is a holism that differs from Quinean holism in its acknowledgment of the background. The background is what makes meaning possible, because it sets up a landscape in which things make sense. Although Quine’s holism highlights the important idea that the meaning of words are dependent on them standing in a dynamic relationship with other words, meanings and practices, it still assumes that what the world fundamentally is, is a collection of these meanings, words and practices. By reducing perceptions to “surface irritations” Quine is still, according to Taylor and Dreyfus, operating within the mediational picture; there is still a *mediation* going on and not a direct contact with the world. One cannot break out of a picture simply by stating that one disagrees with it. The mediational picture is in its nature initially non-explicit and non-articulated, and appears obvious. Dreyfus and Taylor’s investigation of the mediational picture, therefore, is an attempt to articulate the obvious. The articulation of the mediational picture is done by a thorough investigation of the common threads of thinking, in order to find out what underlying assumptions that make it possible to have the philosophical problems we have.

Knowledge has to be situated in relation to everyday coping in order to be knowledge at all, the authors argue. Supporting this claim is the argument that for something to count as a percept it needs already to have its place in a world. They claim that one construct a worldview out of percept, and the percept depend on one’s worldview – this is clearly inspired by Heidegger’s idea of the virtuous circle. The background that functions as the ground of sensemaking – i.e. for things to matter and make sense to us in the first place – existential phenomenologists tend to call the *world*. Dreyfus and Taylor insist that the *world’s* presence is undeniable and inseparable from us – no matter how confusing it may be. In a slightly ironic way, their insistence on the inseparable presence of the world bears similarities to the well-known *cogito* sentence’s insistence on the existence of the thinking subject. No matter how



many features of the experienced world one can doubt as a sceptic, one cannot doubt that one thinks, according to Descartes. Dreyfus and Taylor twist the argument by claiming that no matter how confused one might be with the world, one is still confused with *something* (a world) through a view from *somewhere* (one's engaged coping). The crucial difference between the authors' view and the Cartesian view is, of course, that the Cartesian view results in a sharp distinction between the external world and the internal representation of it – the Inner/Outer image. In *Retrieving Realism*, on the other hand, it is argued for the view of gestalt holism, where pre-conceptual understanding, as that of an engaged agent, works as an alternative route for justification of belief.

Perception is not an internal and passive registration of what is outside, but rather an engaged interaction with the world, which involves senses, thought processes, actions, body and environment. With such an emphasis on analysing perception, it is surprising that Edmund Husserl's phenomenological philosophy is not discussed

to a larger extent in the book. Dreyfus and Taylor leave out Husserl's thorough analysis of perception despite the fact that Husserlian thoughts have made a crucial impact on the philosophy of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. Dreyfus, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Husserl's theory of perception, seems to find Husserl's phenomenology too Cartesian. However, given Husserl's huge influence on the phenomenological tradition that is followed in *Retrieving Realism*, it appears quite unnatural to more or less leave Husserl out of the picture without any explanation.

Also, later in the book, issues that could have been natural and interesting topics of discussion are left out. At one point, for example, it is referred to Merleau-Ponty's discussion of how Cezanne's abstract artworks attempted to "give [the viewers] a sense of the reality of the objects more convincing than that of Renaissance perspective..." (2015:60). By painting a still life in many colors and seen from many perspectives at the same time, he attempted to give the viewer a sense of objects coming into stable shape. The authors seem to have taken it for granted that

modernist art with its abstractions of the human form – well represented by Cezanne’s depictions of humans that barely look like humans, due to the bright colors and the many simultaneously presented perspectives – are more engaging than classical figurative art. The view that classical art, depicting recognizable human features, themes, and stories, are more engaging than the disinterested depiction of more abstract forms is not even considered. Overlooking this option makes the argument of this passage less convincing. According to Kant, who initiated the modernist aesthetics with *The Critique of Practical Reason*, artworks should be evaluated from a disinterested point of view – that is, not related to human interests. Cezanne’s non-sensual depictions of humans follow the Kantian doctrine of disinterestedness. The conflict between the Kantian disinterestedness and the engaged worldview the book argues in favour of would have been an interesting topic of discussion that unfortunately is overlooked.

Although art is not a central point of discussion in *Retrieving Realism*, the uncritical support of Merleau-Ponty’s claim about Cezanne’s art illustrates the kind of aspects that deserve more attention and discussion in the book. The quote from Merleau-Ponty states that “[t]o trace just a single outline [i.e. an object’s shape, etc.] sacrifices depth – that is, the dimension in which the thing is presented not as spread out before us but as an inexhaustible reality full of reserves” (2015:61). If we take the role as the Devil’s advocate, Merleau-Ponty’s point about obtaining a grip on the perceptual scene that does not sacrifice the perceptual depth does not need to conflict with a dualist worldview. Why indeed must an embodied perspective overcome the Cartesian dualist picture? Husserl’s phenomenology does not need to be seen as an overcoming of the dualist picture, and yet his concepts of eidetic reduction (tracing out generalizable structures in our experience) and focus on the bodily activity seem to open for a similarly rich perceptual experience as that which Merleau-Ponty refers to. The point of this observation is simply to state that the need of overcoming the dualist picture *completely* does not appear as absolute when the consequences of this overcoming are taken into regard.

Dreyfus and Taylor insists, however, on challenging the meditational view by pointing out that the meditational view, inherited by Descartes’ dualism, is simply an ontologized method. The fundamental idea of mediational epistemology is that *only through* intermediaries can we have knowledge about something outside ourselves.

When this method of doing epistemology is ontologized, we end up with an Inner/Outer picture of the world. Dreyfus and Taylor aim at making their readers aware of this mediational approach, which seems to be so embedded into the western understanding of the world that people adopt it without even realizing it.

According to the mediational view, the way to attain knowledge is to break down explicit bits of information from a disinterested point of view. This leaves no room for the holistic gestalt view of our being in the world. Talking about the *things in themselves*, to use the Kantian phrasing, or independent scientific theses makes no sense in an engaged view of the world. Also, referring to an idea, as some metaphysical independent entity, is according to Dreyfus and Taylor more obfuscating than it is clarifying. Indeed, the whole idea that one can *globally* doubt the world’s existence only arises out of the possibility of the Cartesian representations to be wrong about the world they are representations of. This critique of the metaphysical tradition of today is perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book, and important to take seriously. Philosophy is meant to be clarifying, so if referring to the Idea actually serves as more confusing than clarifying, it is a serious problem. Dreyfus and Taylor claim that, “To challenge the established Cartesian view, one may have to make what is merely taken for granted explicit” (2015:102). The authors do make explicit several aspects of reality that we probably take for granted. However, whether the book fully succeeds in establishing a new way of engaging in reality that completely overcomes the Cartesian picture is not as evident.

LITERATURE:

Dreyfus, H. and Taylor, C. 2015, *Retrieving Realism*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.