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Towards a Theory of Common-Sense Realism

0. The Visual Mind

My aim in the present paper is to outline a specific philosophical strategy for the defense of common-sense realism and the rejection of relativism. The strategy is specific in that it is based on the assumption that the human mind is a visual one – indeed, as I will stress, fundamentally a kinesthetic or motor one. The primary contact we make with reality is not verbally mediated; rather, it is direct, kinesthetic, perceptual, visual.

Now my impression is that the visual approach is still entirely foreign to mainstream philosophy. So let me here begin so to speak at an introductory level. Let me perform, in your virtual presence, an experiment. The task is to count the number of ground-floor level windows in the house I live in. Normally, I could just walk around the house, and count the windows. But if I happen to be away, giving a conference talk, I cannot do that. What I can do is to close my eyes, *imagine* going round the house, and *mentally* count the windows. Having concluded the experiment, I come up with the number ten. Perhaps I have made a mistake. If I have, I can, once at home, correct myself by actually walking around and counting. Others are welcome to come to my place and repeat the counting. The result will, perhaps after some initial misunderstandings and explanations, turn out to be the same in every case, and in any conceptual framework. There will be nothing relative about it.

Would you be able to perform a similar experiment? Does everyone have vivid mental images? My understanding is that quite a few people claim not to experience such. And of course this is, famously, what Galton learnt in the 1880s, when sending out a questionnaire asking what kind of visual memories the addressee had of his or her breakfast table of that morning. Did they remember the layout of the items on the table? Did they remember colours? It was, mostly, well-educated adult males, having spent a lifetime with reading and writing, who replied that they had no visual recollections whatsoever, no visual mental images. Galton was baffled, and tried to find a solution to the problem: how do then these people manage to *think* at all? His solution:

the missing faculty seems to be replaced so serviceably by other modes of conception, chiefly, I believe, connected with the incipient motor sense, not of the eyeballs only but of the muscles generally, that men who declare themselves entirely deficient in the power of seeing mental pictures can nevertheless give life-like descriptions of what they have seen and can otherwise express themselves as if they were gifted with a vivid visual imagination.¹

Not only in the case of memory images, but more generally, too, there is the motor dimension beneath the visual one. Facial expressions and gestures precede words both in the evolution of mankind and the development of the individual. This is an ancient insight, formulated by Plato already, insisted on also by Thomas Reid, the emblematic figure of common-sense philosophy. Reid was impressed by what he saw as “the natural signs of human thoughts, purposes, and desires... .. the natural language of mankind. An infant”, Reid

¹ Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and Its Development* (1883), 2nd ed., London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1907, p. 61.

wrote, “may be put into a fright by an angry countenance, and soothed again by smiles”.² This became a great subject for Darwin, too. A topic he was particularly fascinated by was the expression of attitudes such as affirmation and negation. To quote just two brief passages: “[a] man ... who vehemently rejects a proposition, will almost certainly shut his eyes or turn away his face... ... in refusing food, especially if it be pressed on them, children frequently move their heads several times from side to side, as we do in shaking our heads in negation.”³ Some years later Mallery, in his “Sign Language Among North American Indians”, described the gesture of “negation ... expressed by the right hand raised toward the shoulder, with the palm opposed to the person to whom response is made. This is the rejection of the idea presented”.⁴ And let me here add a one-sentence third quote, written a century on by the prominent scientific realist Wilfrid Sellars, in a late paper of his where he as it were stepped back from his linguistic bias so characteristic of his major works: “The concept of *rejection* is more basic than the concept of negation.”⁵

Gestures do more than just express attitudes. The art theorist and Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim in his *Visual Thinking* speaks of “descriptive” gestures,

those forerunners of line drawing. ... the perceptual qualities of shape and motion are present in the very acts of thinking depicted by the gestures and are in fact the medium in which the thinking itself takes place. These perceptual qualities are not necessarily visual or only visual. In gestures, the kinesthetic experiences of pushing, pulling, advancing, obstructing, are likely to play an important part.⁶

Arnheim’s views on visual imagery and the motor have been strongly influenced by the prominent turn-of-the-century American psychologist Titchener. According to the latter, “[m]eaning is, originally, kinaesthesia; the organism faces the situation by some bodily attitude”.⁷ Words build on imagery, but imagery, Titchener stressed, builds on kinaesthesia. Titchener’s position was taken up and radicalized by Margaret Washburn. As she put it: “the whole of the inner life is correlated with and dependent upon bodily movement”.⁸

To round out and sum up: Verbal language emerges from the natural language of facial expressions and gestures, which are movement and image at the same time. Our core vocabulary gains meaning from the visual and motor images it is based on (our extended vocabulary consists of metaphors, but to understand a live metaphor⁹ it is necessary to grasp the images it evokes). The human mind is primarily visual and motor. It is not through the mediation of words we make contact with reality, but through direct perception, with visual perception playing the definitive role.

1. Realism vs. Relativism

The sentence I concluded the previous section with amounts to a partial – rudimentary – description of, and argument for, my position: common-sense realism. Now realism – as also

² Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind, On the Principles of Common Sense*, 1764, 3rd ed. 1769, p. 89.

³ Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, 1872, pp. 32 and 273.

⁴ Garrick Mallery, “Sign Language Among North American Indians Compared with that Among Other Peoples and Deaf-Mutes”, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881, p. 290.

⁵ Wilfrid Sellars, “Mental Events”, *Philosophical Studies* 39 (1981), p. 343.

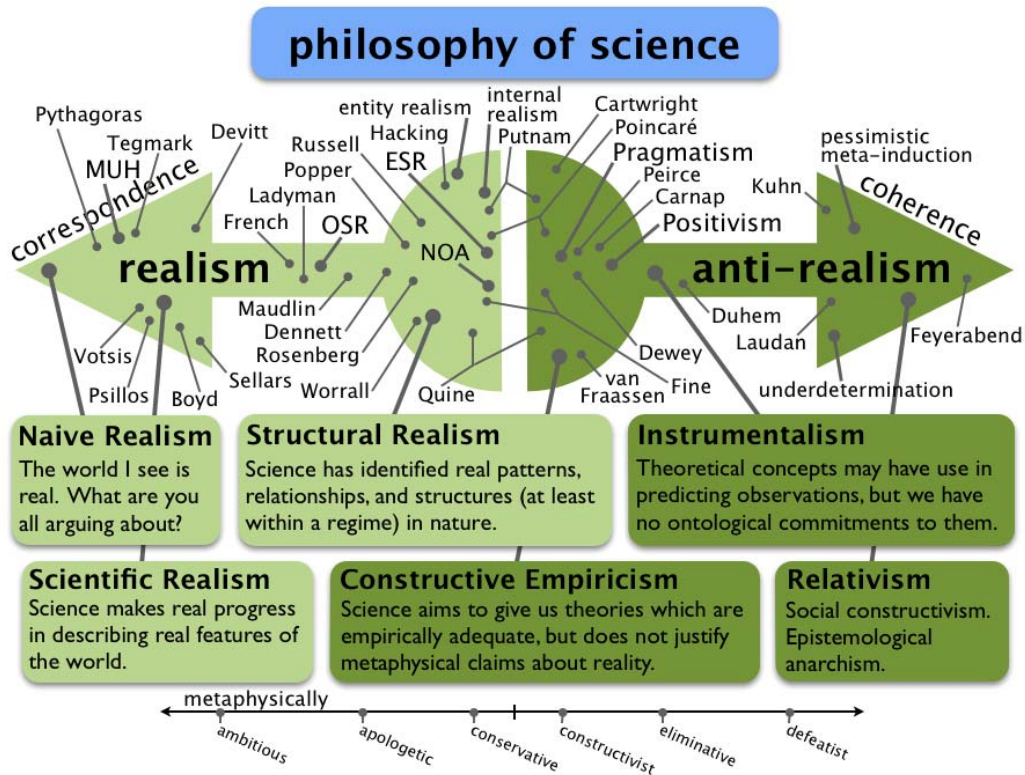
⁶ Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969, pp. 117 f.

⁷ Edward Bradford Titchener, *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Processes*, New York: Macmillan, 1909, p. 176.

⁸ Margaret Floy Washburn, *Movement and Mental Imagery: Outlines of a Motor Theory of the Complexer Mental Processes*, Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1916, p. xiii.

⁹ On image and metaphor see my volume *Meaning and Motoricity: Essays on Image and Time*, Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 2014, pp. 30, 89, 93 f., 99 f.

anti-realism, thus also relativism – seems to come in innumerable varieties. Let me here print an oft-visited diagram from the internet,¹⁰ and let me make some comments. First, common-sense realism is mistakenly said to be “naïve”; it is a sophisticated philosophical position; the views of the common man in the street do not yet amount to a philosophy of common sense.



Secondly, I suggest that common-sense realism is the only realism worthy of the name, all other “realisms” are phoney compromises.¹¹ Thirdly, I have to point out that non-relativists of course have a hard time understanding the fine distinctions relativists make between varieties of their creed; they find it difficult not to see relativism and social constructivism as belonging to the same continuum; and they believe any relativism, if it goes beyond the obvious, is false.

A relativism clearly going beyond the obvious is “epistemic replacement relativism”. In a recent defence of this approach, taking issue with Paul Boghossian, Martin Kusch wrote:

... Galileo recognized that facts about motion are relative facts. ... Galileo showed that ... utterances of the form ‘x moves’ are untrue – they are either false or incomplete. Moreover, Galileo also pointed out that the closest truths in the vicinity of these untruths are relational truths of the form *x moves relative to frame of reference F*. This makes it natural to suggest that Galileo was asking us to change the way we speak: *replace* the nonrelativized sentences with relativized ones, and assert only the relational propositions.

¹⁰ Find it at: www.facebook.com/StudiesinHPS/photos/a.150522365138797.1073741827.150501675140866/313432715514427/?type=1&theater.

¹¹ I feel it particularly important to say this when it comes to today’s so fashionable “structural realism”, see my argument in the chapter “Visualization and the Horizons of Scientific Realism”, in my *Meaning and Motoricity* (cf. note 9 above), see esp. p. 33. In the diagram above, ESR stands for “epistemic structural realism”, OSR for “ontological structural realism” (and NOA for “natural ontological attitude”).

... Galileo's relativism is the paradigm instance of the template of "replacement relativism".¹²

In his analysis, Kusch suggests the formula: "our epistemic system ... is one of many equally valid epistemic systems".¹³ And he makes it clear that this is a formula that actually expresses his own position.

We have here a clear example of what one might call the *linguistic bias in philosophy* – note that people basically do not *speak* about movement, they *see* it and *experience* it. And when – rarely – they *do* experience relative movement, they as a rule, sooner or later, discover that they were suffering from an illusion. Enlightened common sense today understands that the Earth's immobility is such an illusion. But I wonder if one should convince enlightened common sense to accept relativism. In fact I am sure one should not, because mankind's survival chances would thereby probably diminish. This is an age-old argument, but let me refer here to three more or less recent, important works once again formulating it.

First, to *The Rediscovery of Common Sense Philosophy* by Boulter, stressing that "natural selection favours those organisms whose perceptual systems generate visual perceptions which happen to correspond structurally more closely to that of the environment itself".¹⁴ Secondly, to Lynd Ferguson's *Common Sense*, putting forward the "guiding idea" that "the individual members of our species would not get along as successfully as they do on this earth if their common-sense beliefs about the world ... were not for the most part true".¹⁵ And thirdly, there is the devastating paper by Susan Haack, "Reflections on Relativism", beginning with the observation: "'Relativism' refers, not to a single thesis, but to a whole family. Each resembles the others in claiming that something is relative to something else; each differs from the others in what it claims is relative to what."¹⁶ Haack takes the side of common-sense realism, with a subtle version of her own she calls "innocent realism", holding that "[p]erception is interpretative; but it is also direct".¹⁷

2. Scientific vs. Common-Sense Realism

What relations do obtain between common sense, common-sense realism, and scientific realism? The world of common sense is that of everyday time and space, of persons, objects, of *observable* entities, perhaps also of God, but on this latter point views begin to differ: William James believed the idea of God to be part of the common-sense world-view, G. E. Moore did not. Also, Moore held that common-sense truths were timeless, not open to revision by the progress of science. Moore's friend Wittgenstein, by contrast, tended to suggest that the task of philosophy was actually to enable common sense to integrate the ever-evolving discoveries of the natural sciences. I understand Wittgenstein as striving to make the seemingly contradictory views of the scientist compatible with "the coarse views of the man in the street".¹⁸

¹² Martin Kusch, "Epistemic Replacement Relativism Defended" (2006), in Mauricio Suárez, Mauro Dorato and Miklós Rédei, eds., *EPSA Epistemology and Methodology of Science: Launch of the European Philosophy of Science Association*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2010, this passage on p. 165.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

¹⁴ Stephen Boulter, *The Rediscovery of Common Sense Philosophy*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p. 114.

¹⁵ Lynd Ferguson, *Common Sense*, London, Routledge, 1989, p. iv.

¹⁶ Susan Haack, "Reflections on Relativism: From Momentous Tautology to Seductive Contradiction" (1996), in Haack's *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate: Unfashionable Essays*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 149.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹⁸ See my papers "Wittgenstein and Common-Sense Philosophy", in András Benedek and Kristóf Nyíri, eds., *Beyond Words: Pictures, Parables, Paradoxes* (series VISUAL LEARNING, vol. 5), Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang, 2015, pp. 231–243, and "Wittgenstein as a Common-Sense Realist", forthcoming in *Conceptus*, issue 101 (2016).

While the common-sense world is that of observable objects, modern science is positing *unobservable* entities in order to explain the observable world. Scientific realism holds that the unobservable entities posited by science are real. By implication, some or all of the entities of the common-sense world might turn out to be mere appearances. In an encompassing and profound analysis Sellars comes very close to conclude that the scientific image of the world will ultimately supplant the common-sense (the “manifest”) one.¹⁹ By contrast, Michael Devitt in his brilliant book *Realism and Truth* argues that “scientific realism does not undermine common-sense realism”.²⁰ He believes that common-sense realism does not need to defend itself by having recourse to operationalism or instrumentalism – to positions maintaining that “unobservables are simply ‘useful fictions’”. These positions, in Devitt’s view, require *observability* to have “an epistemic significance which it cannot have”.²¹ Now I can agree neither with the main drift of the argument Sellars puts forward, nor with the particular point Devitt makes about instrumentalism. Enlightened common sense should not, and cannot, give up its primacy over science. And I suggest that we are indeed justified in taking some scientific theories to be purely instrumental; however, here our guiding criterion should be *not* observability, but rather *imaginability*. We cannot imagine what we cannot *visualize*. We cannot visualize say quantum theory,²² or time as the fourth dimension of space. The limits of scientific realism should be drawn at the point where the possibility of visualization ends.²³

3. Seeing Is Knowing: Realism Defended

Both “seeing” and “knowing” are words with a wide variety of meanings – the above subtitle is not meant as a well-defined proposition, it is just meant to convey the idea that by looking at the world we are gaining real knowledge of it.²⁴

3.1. The Visible World

Our mind is attuned to seeing, because there is a world with visible properties. This common-sense assumption has been analyzed, and corroborated, by an extensive and ramified body of literature. Here I have to restrict myself to just four – carefully chosen – references. The first one is to psychologist J. J. Gibson, who in a number of influential papers and books, from the 1950s on, formulated a new – he termed it “ecological” – theory of vision. In his essay “New Reasons for Realism” he explains that “[t]he structure of an array of ambient light from the earth” displays “invariants ... specific to the substances of which objects are composed, to the edges of objects, and to the layout of their surfaces”, adding some pages later: “The doctrine of secondary qualities comes from a misunderstanding.”²⁵ My second reference is to Arnheim once more, in particular to his formula “The mind cannot give shape to the shapeless”²⁶, con-

¹⁹ Wilfrid Sellars, “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man” (1960), repr. in Wilfrid Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality*, London: Routledge, 1963, cf. esp. pp. 19, 27, 31 f., 36–39.

²⁰ Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth* (1984), 2nd ed. with a new afterword, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997, p. 5, cf. pp. 81 f.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

²² Devitt concedes that quantum theory is perhaps “not to be trusted at this stage as a guide to reality” (*ibid.*, p. 132), but he does not formulate a general framework within which such a concession would naturally emerge.

²³ This is the position I argue for in my “Visualization and the Horizons of Scientific Realism” (cf. note 11 above), see esp. pp. 21, 23 f. and 30–33.

²⁴ A fascinating discussion of the topic “seeing” vs. “knowing” is given by Ernst H. Gombrich in his *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation*, London: Phaidon Press, 1960, cf. esp. pp. 12–14, 247 and 277 f., on p. 277 (and on p. 357 in the corresponding note) with reference also to Bernard Berenson’s notorious book *Seeing and Knowing* (1953).

²⁵ J. J. Gibson, “New Reasons for Realism”, *Synthese*, vol. 17, no. 2 (1967), pp. 164 and 170.

²⁶ *Visual Thinking*, p. 90.

veying a basic Gestalt message. Thirdly, I refer to the important 1995 paper on common sense by Barry Smith. Elaborating on Gibson's theory, Smith offers a sustained argument in favour of the idea that the colours, tones, shapes, etc. that determine our perceptions and actions are to be "conceived as qualities of external things".²⁷ And lastly, I come back to Boulter, whose "transcendental argument for common sense in the domain of sense perception" again builds on Gibson. As Boulter concludes: "An external, *pre-structured* world is the source of the structure found in optic arrays. ... Without a pre-structured world there is no visual perception."²⁸ Let us draw the threads together. We are justified to regard edges, surfaces, shapes and colours to be objective visible properties of an external world.

3.2. *The Visual Road to Realism*

A royal road to acquire a grasp of the essential argument for visual realism and against visual relativism is to follow the journey of Gombrich from the first edition of *Art and Illusion* (1960) to his final and devastating critique of Goodman's irrealism, in a talk he gave in 1981.²⁹ I have provided an overview of that journey in an earlier essay of mine, writing:

1972 saw Gombrich's first direct attack on Goodman, the former's main contentions here being that "Goodman appears to think that the eye must be strictly stationary" whereas "no stationary view can give us complete information", and also that the pictorial technique of *perspectival representation* reflects something essentially natural and objective – it does not need to be learned to be decoded. The second, devastating, attack came six years later, with Gombrich's paper "Image and Code: Scope and Limits of Conventionalism in Pictorial Representation", vindicating the common-sense idea of pictures as natural signs, and explicating the controversial concept of *resemblance* by that of *equivalence of response*. As Gombrich here momentarily puts it: "the images of Nature, at any rate, are not conventional signs, like the words of human language, but show a real visual resemblance, not only to our eyes or our culture but also birds or beasts".³⁰

A longer journey is the one beginning with the first generation of Gestalt psychologists. I will just quote Wertheimer and Koffka. In 1923 Wertheimer wrote: "Our nervous system developed under the conditions of the biological environment; the Gestalt tendencies which were formed in that process do not by a miracle correspond to the regular conditions of the environment..."³¹ A related observation by Koffka: "in reality our world is ... not ... a burlesque nightmare; as a rule, things are what they look like, or otherwise expressed, their looks tell us what to do with them, although as ... optical illusion[s] ... show..., perception may be deceptive".³²

Of the second generation, Arnheim was a leading member. He adhered to the Gestalt school's founding view that experiencing images necessarily involves experiencing the patterns of forces they embody and convey. This applied to the images provided by our physical environment, but also to mental images, as well as to artificial images such as drawings,

²⁷ Barry Smith, "Formal Ontology, Common Sense and Cognitive Science", *Int. J. Human-Computer Studies* 43 (1995), pp. 641–667, the quoted passage on p. 647.

²⁸ Stephen Boulter, *The Rediscovery of Common Sense Philosophy* (cf. note 14 above), pp. 107 and 111.

²⁹ Ernst H. Gombrich, "Image and Code: Scope and Limits of Conventionalism in Pictorial Representation", delivered at a symposium in 1978, published in Wendy Steiner (ed.), *Image and Code*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981.

³⁰ Kristóf Nyíri, "'Gombrich on Image and Time'" (2009), reprinted as a chapter of my *Meaning and Motoricity* (cf. note 9 above), pp. 55 f.

³¹ My translation. The original German runs: "Das Nervensystem hat sich unter den Bedingungen der biologischen Umwelt ausgebildet; die Gestalttendenzen, die sich dabei ausgebildet haben, sind nicht wunderbarerweise den regulären Bedingungen der Umgebung entsprechend..." (Max Wertheimer, "Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt", Part II, *Psychologische Forschung*, vol. 4, 1923, pp. 336 f.)

³² Kurt Koffka, *Principles of Gestalt Psychology* (1935), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955, p. 76.

paintings, photographs and of course films and videos. Discussing memory images, Arnheim called attention to the “[f]orces inherent in the shape itself”; analyzing children’s and adult amateurs’ drawings, he wrote of the “configurations of forces discerned in the draftsman’s world and interpreted in his pictures” and the “constellation of forces that underlies the theme of the picture”.³³

4. Conclusion

In the wake of Arnheim, let me here make two comments which will bring me to the end of my paper. First, if the images provided by the world around us act like physical forces, then clearly they provide us with direct contact to reality. Secondly, reality can be depicted in various styles (Arnheim lays great stress on the realism of children’s non-naturalistic drawings), contemporary enlightened common sense however does indeed set priorities between those styles, according to the practical task at hand. Children might depict reality in peculiar ways, but we have no reason to suppose that the visual world seems different to them from the way it seems to us. To quote Devitt: “Why does the world seem the way it does? The obvious answer is that the world seems that way because it *is* that way”, a correspondence easily explicable “along Darwinian lines”.³⁴ To some animal species the world of course might even *seem* different. However, as Boulter points out: “The fact that an organism’s perceptual systems do not pick up or respond to *all* of reality does not imply that what they do pick up are not objective features of an extralinguistic reality.”³⁵

To sum up: By integrating new scientific results, common sense is historically evolving. Still, contemporary enlightened common sense, guided by the philosophy of common-sense realism, has a conservative view of scientific discoveries: it does not accept the view that scientific change implies radical changes in ontology. Hence contemporary common sense does not have room, just as common sense never had room, for relativism. Common sense believes that it relies on the best available sources of knowledge. It understands that it might hold erroneous views, but trusts that progress will correct them. Epistemic systems different from its own it cannot but consider simply wrong.

³³ *Visual Thinking*, pp. 81, 259 and 262.

³⁴ Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth* (cf. note 20 above), pp. 74 and 78.

³⁵ Boulter, *op. cit.*, p. 103.