

Kristóf Nyíri

Is There an Objective External World, and Is It Knowable?

Ladies and Gentlemen, let me begin, first, by apologizing for the above all-too bookish title – when coming to the end of my talk, I will suggest a much less pedantic one. Secondly, I want to quote from a paper of mine published in Hungarian, in 2002, where I wrote: “philosophy deals with the solution of *conceptual problems* arising in science, politics, etc., so ultimately it deals with *problems of communication*”. Today I would use a more radical formula. The task of philosophy, I would now say, is to communicate the ever new results of scientific research to *common people* – common educated people – so as to modify their ways of thinking, enabling the common person to face the challenges of a changing world, and the changes in our knowledge of the world.

Kristóf Nyíri, „Túl az iskolafilozófiákon” [Beyond Bookish Philosophies], *Magyar Tudomány*, 2002/3.

My present talk is divided into six sections. First section: “Common-Sense Realism and the Visual”. Second: “Common Sense vs. Science”. Third: “The Visual Origins of Language”. Fourth: “Depiction and Reality”. Fifth section: “Philosophy and Common Sense”. Sixth and last section: “Philosophy in a New Format”.

And so let me begin with the first section.

1. Common-Sense Realism and the Visual

Philosophy today is torn into innumerable trends, schools, disciplines and subdisciplines, with an unhappy practice becoming typical: instead of offering arguments, authors now simply tend to declare which school they belong to, regarding, thereby, their position as proven, and all views outside the given school as refuted, indeed as not even worthy of refutation. Now of course it might provide some preliminary information if authors do actually indicate the broad philosophical perspective from which they will approach the set of problems they intend to discuss. The problem I here intend to face: is there an objective external world, and can we attain knowledge of it? I will put forward

arguments, as well as quoting arguments from others I find particularly convincing. Before that however let me on my part too point to the philosophical stream I adhere to. This is the stream of *common-sense realism*.

Emblematic representatives of common-sense realist philosophy were Thomas Reid in the second half of the eighteenth century, and G. E. Moore in the first third of the twentieth – I myself think that the later Wittgenstein, too, belongs to the common-sense realist trend, but with this view I clearly join the position of a very few. I have provided

Cf. http://www.academia.edu/34190040/Pictorial_Truth_Essays_on_Wittgenstein_Realism_and_Conservatism

a detailed list of the literature (of writings produced, to say it again, by a dwindling minority) in my volume *Pictorial Truth*,

to this list I would now add Paul O’Grady’s paper “Wittgenstein and Relativism”. Common-sense realism professes the principle

that the world forms a unity: we believe, and we believe everyone believes it too – I am exploiting a formulation given by Lynd Forgyson –

Lynd Forgyson, *Common Sense*, London: Routledge, 1989, pp. 14 f.

that there is a single physical world common to us “and all other people and sentient beings who are now alive or who

have ever lived. ... the world is made up of objects, events, and states of affairs that are independent of the thoughts and experiences I and others have of it.” I highly esteem Susan Haack, especially her papers “Reflections of an Old Feminist” and “Reflections on Relativism”. Let me also mention Ste-

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

phen Boulter’s book *The Rediscovery of Common Sense Philosophy*. Boulter I find particularly interesting also in the sense that he connects the possible defence of

common-sense realism precisely to the way the visual, *sight*, mediates reality. I believe Wittgenstein, too, came to be in a position to build up a sort of common-sense philosophy by being, at the same time, a philosopher of the visual. Wittgenstein as a philosopher of the visual: now with this interpretation I am really alone in the world. Be that as it may: I see my own contribution to the philosophy of common-sense realism, or generally to the the philosophy of realism, in representing the view that no consistent philosophical realism is conceivable with-

“Wittgenstein and Relativism”, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 12, no. 3, pp. 315–337.

“Knowledge and Propaganda: Reflections of an Old Feminist”, and “Reflections on Relativism: From Momentous Tautology to Seductive Contradiction”, in Haack’s volume *Manifesto of a Passionate Moderate*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998.

out discovering and recognizing the cognitive role of the visual, the pictorial.

2. Common Sense vs. Science

Common-sense realism is the only realism worthy of the name. In contemporary philosophy common-sense realism competes with *scientific realism* on the one hand and what is called “structural realism” on the other, common-sense realism to date being the loser. This should not surprise us. Philosophers opposed to common sense were

regarded by Reid as lunatics, indeed as mad, and Wittgenstein made the ironic remark: “This fellow isn’t insane. We are only doing philosophy.”

One fool makes many, common sense for the time being is on a losing track.

Structural realism – this is today’s most fashionable kind of realism – asserts that it is only the mathematical content of our given scientific theories that can be regarded as definitely true, all other contents are changing and thus uncertain. Structural realism is just relativism with a fig leaf, let us not waste more words on it. Scientific realism, by contrast,

Cf. Kristóf Nyíri, [*Meaning and Motoricity: Essays on Image and Time*](#), Frankfurt/M.: Peter Lang Edition, 2014, p. 33.

should no doubt be taken seriously. Its most important representative is perhaps still Wilfrid Sellars, who passed away in 1989. In order to distinguish the scientific world-view from that of everyday thinking, Sellars refers to so-called *postulated, unobservable entities* as characterizing science – think, say, of the directly not visible particles of elementary physics. According to Sellars it is the scientific world-view that provides a valid description of reality, and this world-view will gradually supplant our everyday world-view as we hold it today. Now Sellars is obviously right in the sense that our everyday world-view, under the impact of science, of course continuously changes – today’s common-sense thinking, as the saying goes, is the science of yesterday. This is the sense in which we speak of enlightened common-sense thinking. Yet Sellars somehow still seems to overestimate the role of science. For what does science actually provide us with? Science delivers valid data about the world, constructs working theories to accommodate these data, conducts experiments, makes predictions, helps to design instruments. Science however does not give us a world-view. It is philosophy that – filtering and interpreting scientific theories – provides us with a world-view. In the expression “world-

view” I emphasize the element *view*. Common sense cannot imagine anything that cannot be visualized. Philosophy, when communicating to everyday thinking the new and newest theories of science, cannot omit to take into consideration whether the given new theory is, in the strict sense of the term, *graphic*. If a theory cannot be visualized at all, then – this is my position – it should be regarded as a merely formal instrument, mathematical device, of science, but surely not as the description of reality. Such a position would have been unacceptable to Sellars, dazzled as he was, for most of his career, by the so-called *linguistic turn* in philosophy. Let me note however that towards his last years, in his paper “The Role of Imagination in Kant’s Theory Experience”, as also in his essay “Mental Events”, Sellars be-

Wilfrid Sellars, “The Role of Imagination in Kant’s Theory of Experience”, in H. W. Johnstone, Jr., ed., *Categories: A Colloquium*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1978.

came susceptible to the idea that the visual does indeed play a role in human cognition – the basic idea at the core of the *pictorial turn* or *iconic turn* in the psychology and philosophy of the 1970s. It is in the wake of this turn that the question I will now very briefly discuss emerged as an issue, or re-emerged as an issue, of scholarly interest.

Wilfrid Sellars, “Mental Events”, *Philosophical Studies* 39 (1981), pp. 325–345.

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3. The Visual Origins of Language

Some passages earlier I suggested that no consistent philosophical realism is conceivable without a recognition of the cognitive role of the visual. This recognition essentially involves the discovery that word language, spoken language, is historically grounded in the language of facial expressions and gestures. This is how Thomas Reid summed up the irresistible argument: “if mankind had not a natural language, they

Inquiry into the Human Mind. On the Principles of Common Sense (1764). 3rd ed., London: Cadell–Longman, 1769, p. 73.

could never have invented an artificial one... For all artificial language supposes some compact or agreement to affix a certain meaning to certain signs... but there can be no compact

or agreement without signs, nor without language; and therefore there must be a natural language before any artificial language can be invented”. Our primordial language has motor and at the same time visual foundations. It is the language of an unmediated relation to the world; not a descriptive language, but, rather, one of bodily contact and depictive imagery.

For a detailed discussion see my volume *Meaning and Motoricity*, ch. 7.

4. Depiction and Reality

A stick immersed in water appears bent, shadows sometimes seem like three-dimensional objects; we are often victims of optical illusions; and we know that the image on our retina is far from being a depiction of what we in that moment actually see. Still, what we perceive is, most of the time, reality as it is; our eyes do usually not err; and we very much tend to agree with each other as to what it is we see. The world our eyes and brain construct for us is characteristically the world that in fact surrounds us. As Max Wertheimer, one of the leading

“Untersuchungen zur Lehre von der Gestalt”, Part II. *Psychologische Forschung*, 1923, pp. 336–337. My translation.

representatives of the first generation of the Gestalt movement, has put it: “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.” The common-sense realist arguments of both Forgyson and Boulter center around the idea that hu-

mankind’s evolutionary success is a proof of the effectivity of our cognitive powers. A year before his death Wittgenstein wrote: “Being and seeming may, of course, be independent of

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on Colour*, ed. by G. E. M. Anscombe, Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977. Manuscript source: MS 173:23r, remark entered on March 30, 1950, or slightly later.

one another in exceptional cases, but that doesn’t make them logically independent; the language-game does not reside in the exception.”

5. Philosophy and Common Sense

Let us stay for a moment with Wittgenstein. I am quoting a remark by him written in 1944: “The philosopher is someone who has to cure many diseases of the understanding in himself, before he can arrive at the notions of common sense.” The main dis-

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. by G. H. von Wright, enlarged edition 1998.

ease of philosophers consists in their not being able to withstand the pitfalls of language, arriving, thereby, at nonsensical phrases. Scientists, too, suffer from this disease – for instance the physicist who tells us that “the floor on which we stand is not solid, as it appears to com-

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1958, p. 45.

mon sense, as it has been discovered that the wood consists of particles filling space so thinly that it can almost be called empty” – and the aim of Wittgenstein’s new philosophy

was, precisely, to cure this disease. Looking at today’s mainstream

philosophies and avantgarde physical theories we will probably conclude that Wittgenstein has not succeeded.

6. Philosophy in a New Format

While preparing to upload this paper, I meditated on what reference format I should use. I regularly avoid the (author date) format, since it is obviously unsuitable to convey the history of different editions that is so essential to the humanities. I prefer to give full references in footnotes – the reader just glances at the bottom of the page, and gets the picture. What I now however experience is that, increasingly, reading on a tablet, indeed on a small-size tablet, or even on a smartphone, is becoming the rule. But then it is quite uncomfortable to glance at the bottom of the page – you have to scroll down and up all the time. So how about, I asked myself, using something like sidenotes? That of course meant devising a rather new format, which is what I finally did. Some fifteen minutes ago I promised you to offer a paper title less bookish than the one I had begun with. Right. This is the title I now suggest: “Philosophy in a New Format”.