

Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor: *Retrieving Realism*
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015, 171 pp.¹

This short book presents a well-structured critique of the traditional Cartesian epistemology. It offers a philosophical outlook which, as declared at the beginning, is supposed to retrieve realism and hence avoid extremes in philosophical discourse; such as extreme realism, reductionism or scientism, on the one hand, vague relativism and subjectivism on the other. In the bigger picture, Dreyfus and Taylor try by means of this book to answer a traditional philosophical question “What is the world we live in?” therefore even “What is real?”

The book is divided into eight chapters. In the preface, there is a dedication to Rorty, whose thoughts and objections are discussed in throughout the book. At the beginning, we are presented with a metaphor of a picture, a concept borrowed from Wittgenstein (PI §115), in which we are somehow stuck in. This picture is mediational and it accompanies us the whole life; it affects our way of thinking, behaving and our language. It is a legacy of modern epistemology since Descartes which presents knowledge of things mediated only through inner states/ideas/representations. Our main objective, according to the authors, therefore, is to break ourselves free from the above-mentioned picture in order to see clearly what surrounds us. With clean sight, we are able to avoid many common mistakes while constructing a theory. The authors clearly describe this picture as “not fully explicit”; it is rather “a kind of captivity because it has prevented us from seeing what is wrong with this line of thought” (the mainline epistemological thinking). Provided we manage to identify the picture would be like grasping a big mistake.

Authors claim that it is the idea of grasping external reality by means of internal representations which veils the picture-free reality surrounding us and makes it easy for us to misunderstand the world. What seems to bother them the most is, on the one hand, the claim that in any mediational theory, knowledge gets to us “only through” such representations, ideas, etc., and on the other, that this picture is being taken as given.

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In order to define this picture, so that we could escape it later, one must, according to the authors, identify the four interwoven strands. We can consider them to be attributes of any mediational picture: 1) it has the “only through” structure, 2) the content of our knowledge can be analysed into clearly defined, explicit elements, 3) when justifying our believes one can never go beyond/below these defined elements since they have the status of immediate givens and 4) it has dualist sorting, e.g. with the mental-physical distinction. Needless to say that in some cases one or another strand can be broken, in other words, missing.

As the authors mention, there have been many attempts to deconstruct the mediational picture by breaking the dualistic point of view, such as linguistic turn, materialist turn or Kant’s critical turn. However, these all still kept the “only through” mediational element, therefore failed and stayed captured. The major turn in deconstructing mediational theories was made in the 20th century. At the same time alternative contact theories were being elaborated; they were based on the rejection of Cartesian and Empiricist epistemologies.

A contact theory sougthed by the authors should capture that we are in a direct contact with the world and this contact is primordial, therefore we cannot escape it. We grasp the world and the framework gives its sense to our “grasps of reality”. It points out reembedding of thought and knowledge in the bodily and social-cultural context in which it takes place. Furthermore, such a theory has a temporal depth and has to be seen as having holistic attributes.

The authors further claim that one must understand that our grasps of the world cannot be just representational and that knowledge, properly understood, not only consists of representations but it is lodged within individual minds in the first place. Our grasps are shared and then secondarily imparted to each one of us.

Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty presented an example of successful deconstruction of the mediational view, therefore Dreyfus and Taylor used some of their thoughts as a basis for their own contact theory. On the other hand, they considered Rorty to be a “hidden representationalist”, although he was trying to free himself of representations. May that be as it is, it must be acknowledged that debates with Rorty gave the authors some precious perspectives and possibly, if Rorty had not died before the book was finished, it might have helped Dreyfus and Taylor to explain some uprising questions considering their contact theory, to which I am coming back later in this review.

Dreyfus and Taylor’s own conception, presented almost at the end of this book, was given a name “pluralistic robust realism”. It is basically built upon two pillars: on the one hand, it is phenomenology—the thoughts of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and on the other, the critical perception of Rorty. Its crucial terms

include grasps of reality, embedded coping, embodied agent, direct access, affordances, and temporality.

The first pillar can, therefore, be interpreted as a holistic understanding of reality and people living in it; it is an attempt to combine exact science and philosophy in the frames of understanding the reality surrounding us. Our knowledge is influenced by culture and society, therefore, has to be taken as a whole. It claims that a person is embedded in reality and forced to act on it. We are in contact with this reality and we cope with it (deal with it)² on an everyday basis—we cannot escape this contact because it is primordial. Objects of reality are neutral but they have their affordances which are filled according to the context and time-dependent when grasped (by us). This may characterize the phenomenological part.

The second pillar encompasses debating and reacting to Rorty. He claimed that all objects, even those studied by natural science, are only intelligible on the background of our embedded coping so that the idea of a view from nowhere is literally unintelligible. In other words, we cannot achieve the view of nowhere because we are in a way limited by our own form; we are human and we perceive as humans. The authors, however, considered this as “deflationary” realism and tried to offer their “robust” realism instead, claiming that in order to understand the status of the structures studied by natural science, we have to make sense of an independent reality.

Not only here did the authors part ways with Rorty. He banned the picture, claiming there was none. He also pointed out that we should get away from a number of philosophical dichotomies which have supposedly outlived their usefulness. However, Taylor and Dreyfus argued that in order to escape the mediational picture we need to identify it and deconstruct it. Thus they found Rorty’s approach to knowledge representationalistic. As representations feed the mediational picture, Rorty never managed to escape it.

However, while explaining why their realism is plural, the authors agreed with Rorty at least in one part. They shared his opinion there is no one language for correctly describing nature but right after they counter Rorty, that there could well be many languages each correctly describing a different aspect of reality.

Dreyfus and Taylor explain the position of pluralistic robust realism subsequently: 1) there are multiple ways of interrogating reality (the plural part), which 2) reveal truths independent of us—such truths that require our thinking to be revised and adjusted in order to grasp them (the robust realist part) and where (3) all attempts fail to bring the different ways of interrogating reality into a single mode of questioning that yields a unified picture or theory (so they stay plural).”

² Dreyfus used the term “coping with things”, Taylor used “dealing with things”.

Rorty's critical reception pointed out the drawbacks of this philosophical concept. For example, his claim concerning outlived dichotomies supports a thought which I personally could not get rid of while reading this book. The authors highlighted a number of dichotomies throughout the centuries, arguing that we have to stop distinguishing between the inner and the outer, mind and body etc. However, they keep one of the dichotomies themselves in their plural robust realism and it stands right in the name. On the one hand, they declare that we are in direct access with reality and we cope with it, but on the other, they keep the science view of the world when presenting this concept as "realism", therefore the dichotomy of inner and outer still lives.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned argument, I cannot help but see some similarities with the constructivist point of view, namely Goodman's. The realist view of science is at the first sight the reason why the Dreyfus-Taylor's concept seems to be incompatible with Goodman's worldmaking concept. However, in his *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978) Goodman, as a pluralist, admits that there may be the one world "W" but it would be uninteresting and boring. Furthermore, there are other similarities, for example, affordances could be well interpreted as Goodman's versions, contexts influence the way we see and perceive the world, etc. Dreyfus and Taylor tried to avoid any form of non-realism or anti-realism, but Goodman was neither; he proclaimed himself an irrealist. It remains unanswered why Goodman and his worldmaking, or any kind of constructivism as such, has not been taken into consideration while composing the pluralistic robust realism.

The above-mentioned criticism may be considered irrelevant when compared to such a complex theory which the authors managed to create. Clearly, it is not easy to describe everything they wanted to show. It is possible to see that they expected to be criticized therefore they had tried to support their claims by many other authors as evidence; whether against their way of thinking or to justify it. Sometimes the examples of authors are just too many and that might distract the readers, though. The book itself is somehow a piece of art, a little chaotic but it makes sense in the end. Furthermore, the concept of pluralistic robust realism is definitely worth to be explored deeper and discussed more. Because as the authors say—we cannot escape it.

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