

DISCUSSION.

UNJUSTIFIED CLAIMS FOR NEO-REALISM.

The 'neo-realist' describes himself as an 'open-minded empiricist,'¹ he declares that "it is one of the major purposes of the new realism to justify and to extend the method of logic and of exact science in general,"² and he dwells upon the conformity of his views with those of 'common-sense.' Yet a study of 'realism' in the authoritative form which is given to it by the six authors of *The New Realism* disposes the reader to challenge each of these claims. This paper undertakes to show the incompatibility of 'neo-realism,' as set forth and argued, with the standpoints of science, of empiricism, and of common-sense.

I. The chief quarrel of the scientist with the realist is over the realist's assumption that "hypotheses may be formulated in terms of the evident composition of the known world." This assumption, running persistently through neo-realistic literature, of a positive body of scientific doctrine has no warrant in the history of science and has been over and over again repudiated by scientists. Scientific investigators, reasoning from facts experimentally established, reach divergent conclusions about the constitution of the world. Thus, we have scientific accounts of the universe in terms of energy, in terms of atoms and corpuscles, and in terms of ether-strain. "The success of such theories," Whetham declares, "does but shift the mystery of the unknown. Matter is a persistent strain-form fleeting through a universal sea of æther: we have explained matter in terms of æther. Æther . . . is . . . a fairly close-packed conglomerate of minute grains in continual oscillation: we have explained the properties of the æther. But what of the grains of which the æther is composed? . . . Has a new æther to be invoked to explain their properties? . . . The mind refuses to rest content at any step of the process."³ In truth, the scientist, whose "task," as Ostwald says, is to construct

¹ *The New Realism*, by E. B. Holt, W. T. Marvin, W. P. Montague, R. B. Perry, W. B. Pitkin, and E. G. Spaulding. The Macmillan Co., 1912, p. 40.

² *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³ *The Recent Development of Physical Science*, by W. C. D. Whetham, 1906, pp. 293-294.

"arbitrary concepts,"¹ has need to protest against a philosophy which founds itself upon the 'hypotheses' of science as if these constituted an admitted body of doctrine.

II. Neo-realism seems, thus, to be ignorantly over-reverential in its attitude toward natural science. In relation to empiricism, on the other hand, neo-realism appears to me to combine lip service with actual disrespect. This charge is amply supported by the astonishing use which the neo-realist makes of what he has well-named 'the ego-centric predicament.' The *I*, he admits, is a peculiarly ubiquitous fact and "cannot be eliminated from one's field of study;" but this "mere fact" because it is a 'general fact' which cannot be investigated by the method of agreement and difference is to be set aside as referring "to a difficulty of procedure rather than to a character of things."² The idealist, as is well known, holds that the ubiquity of the ego and the 'impossibility of finding anything that is not known,' suggest the importance rather than the negligibility of the knower in the scheme of reality. But, whichever is right, realist or idealist, so much is certain: the realistic method of dismissing the ego-centric predicament is a dogmatic, not an empirical, procedure.

III. The chief reliance of the neo-realists and unquestionably the chief ground for the popularity of their doctrine is their appeal to common-sense, "that primordial common-sense which believes in a world that exists independently of the knowing of it."³ For two reasons this appeal is unjustified. In the first place, the realists are confusing the every-day philosophy of our day, so-called 'common-sense philosophy,' with 'common-sense' regarded as the immediate conscious reaction of the untutored mind upon its environment. But there is good ground for denying, and therefore no excuse for assuming without argument, that the unreflective, untrained mind, face to face with its own limitations, does believe in a world independent, not only of itself but of all minds. Both the phylogenetic and the ontogenetic study of developing mind suggest the possibility, if not the likelihood, that the forgotten earliest consciousness of child and of race is animistic, that the child and the savage alike 'personify' objects, that the 'outside-myself' is primitively conceived as 'other self.' Common-sense, meaning the instinctive conviction of minds

¹ *Natural Philosophy*, translated by Seltzer, 1910, p. 23. Ostwald goes on to say that these concepts "in circumstances to be foreseen become empirical;" but his context shows that this "prediction" lacks absolute certainty.

² *The New Realism*, p. 11 and ff. Cf. on this point Professor J. B. Pratt's paper on "Professor Perry's Proofs of Realism," *Journal of Philosophy*, IX, 1912, p. 573. I know no clearer criticism of neo-realism.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 10³.

not 'debauched by learning,' may not therefore be invoked, unchallenged, by the neo-realist.

Waiving this point, the objector must urge, in the second place, that only the naive realists, never the new realists, have the right to appeal to common-sense however conceived. This is best shown by a study of the neo-realistic theory of illusion. Neo-realists emphasize the fact that naive realism fails just because of its inability to explain illusions, and that "the first and most urgent problem for the new realists is to amend the realism of common-sense in such wise as to make it compatible with the facts of relativity."¹ Opinions will differ as regards the success with which the neo-realists have 'explained' illusion. To a great degree their explanations certainly consist merely in ambiguous re-statements of the facts of illusion or in irrelevant accounts of the physiological bases of illusion. When Montague says, for example, that "when a child clutches at and misses the stick which he perceives as bent in the water . . . the image of the bent stick which is cast upon his retina . . . produces a purely physical brain-state which directly implies or has for its meaning or 'potentiality,' an external bent stick,"² he is for the most part describing an illusion and not explaining it. And Mr. Holt's interesting account of specific energies and neural periodicities is a contribution to physiology and to psychology in which the idealist finds nothing counter to his metaphysical theories. When, however, Holt unequivocally assents to Alexander's view that "the bent and the straight appearance . . . belong to the same stick,"³ and when Pitkin declares that "green . . . bluish green . . . bluish gray . . . and blue" are at one and the same time "the real physical colors" of "a hillside which is green near at hand . . . bluish green a little farther off, bluish gray at a greater distance, and blue from a still remoter vantage point," explaining this statement by the assertion that "color is a character of a considerable extent of ether which is disturbed in a certain manner,"⁴ they are diverging utterly from the view of 'common-sense.' This divergence becomes more evident in Pitkin's treatment of spatial illusion. A man, he supposes, is eating his breakfast a hundred miles away from a stone wall. "I, having a hallucination, see the man where the stone wall 'really' is; but this fact does not prove that either the man or the wall is not in real space, it is only an illustration of the fact that two spatial things may be projectively related

¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 10³.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 291²-292¹.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 463.

in a cognitive field no less than in a field of lower order so that they are there identical (indiscernible)." Whether or not this is sound doctrine is a question which I do not here consider; but nobody will claim that it is good common-sense. Pitkin himself grants that "one must be quite sophisticated to hold this view," and explains the 'popular view' that an illusion is a 'phantasm of the brain' as "due to a mere motor instinct coupled with ignorance of modern geometry and the profounder types of space relations." But no one can fairly expect the 'plain man' to have modern geometry at his finger's ends, so that we here have good neo-realistic authority in this protest against the rather childish eagerness of the neo-realist to "eat his cake and have it too." Either his claim to conformity with 'primordial common-sense' or his right to these 'explanations' of illusion must certainly be abandoned. No neo-realist, with his reputation for a 'sensitive scientific conscience' at stake, can afford to cling to both.

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