

REVIEW ESSAY

Coming to Grips with Realism

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Retrieving Realism renders the joint philosophical goals of Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor into what is probably their final and most concise form. It has two main objectives: first, it aims to deconstruct the mediationalism that undergirds Western philosophy, and second, it endorses contact theory, or embodied/embedded coping, as an alternative. In this essay, I present the book's most salient themes and reveal areas that are ripe for further philosophical consideration. I also direct the reader to the work's genuine ontological challenge: how to come to grips with contact theory beyond the borders of epistemology.

Keywords: Dreyfus, Taylor, Realism, Mediationalism, Contact Theory

Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015, ISBN 978-0-674-96751-9, \$39.95; £29.95; €36.00. 184pp., hbk.

The book *Retrieving Realism* has been in the works for more than a decade. In 2004, Dreyfus signaled Taylor's intention to publish a monograph bearing the name in the article "Taylor's (Anti-) Epistemology." The book was supposed to outline "a detailed phenomenological alternative to current epistemology."¹ Three years later, Taylor footnoted the same title in *A Secular Age*, pegging it this time as a co-written project with Dreyfus. Their work promised to offer "a fuller description of modern epistemology and its deconstruction."² In 2013, Taylor published a preview of the work as his contribution to *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World*, a volume dedicated to

¹ Hubert Dreyfus, "Taylor's (Anti-) Epistemology" in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 79.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 834.

the recent debate between Dreyfus and McDowell.³ The essay was also given the same name.

The long-awaited fruit of the Dreyfus-Taylor alliance has finally come to print in June 2015. *Retrieving Realism* stands as an account that précises the agenda of two of the most prominent philosophers of our time. It renders their joint philosophical goals into what is probably their final and most concise form. The first objective of the book is to advance a powerful critique of the “mediational” picture of knowledge that undergirds the Western tradition. Its second objective, contra the inner/outer structure that dominates modern epistemology, is to endorse what Dreyfus and Taylor call “contact” theory—in more familiar jargon, embodied or embedded coping—as its viable philosophical replacement. The twofold goal of both thinkers is to criticize and to revolutionize our understanding of how human beings *really* think and act in the world. Their work, then, is nothing short of ambitious.

The book is divided into eight parts. The first chapter, which begins with Wittgenstein’s famous phrase which goes, “A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably,”⁴ problematizes the image that today holds philosophy in thrall: the Mind-in-World picture of mediational epistemology. According to Dreyfus and Taylor, mediationalism runs wide and deep, and affects even the philosophical revolutions that claim to have escaped its dualist snare. This picture has its roots in Cartesian dualism. Descartes argued that external (physical) reality can only be accessible through mediational (mental) entities he called “ideas,” which he held responsible for averting skepticism and establishing certainty. Knowledge, following the Cartesian legacy, is thus framed as the (correct) inner depiction of outer reality. Dreyfus and Taylor point out that at present, the inner/outer structure functions as a recurring motif in linguistic, materialist, critical, and postmodernist traditions. In pegging knowledge, or what we take to be true, as obtained from “ideas” (Descartes; Locke), “categories” (Kant), “surface irritations” (Quine), or as manifested by “beliefs” or “sentences-held-true” (Davidson; Rorty), the general conceptual structure of mediational opposition remains intact. We have access to knowledge only through an epistemic relation that exists between us and—as distinct and separate from—the world.

³ See Charles Taylor, “Retrieving Realism” in *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate*, ed. Joseph K. Schear (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), 61-90. In relation to this work, see also Charles Taylor, “Foundationalism and the Inner-Outer Distinction” in *Reading McDowell: On Mind and World*, ed. Nicholas H. Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 106-119.

⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 48.

But how do we escape this overarching picture? In the second chapter, Dreyfus and Taylor briefly narrate the progress of the Kantian and Hegelian metaphilosophical attempts to overcome this knowledge-game, and argue that at present, the phenomenology of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Todes have been the most helpful in pointing us in the proper direction. Standing on their shoulders, Dreyfus and Taylor make the constructive claim that contact theory can function as the better alternative to mediationalism. The technique that they employ goes something like this: to go *beyond* the mediational picture, we must attempt to reveal what lies *beneath* it. That is, there must exist a more primordial picture that underlies current epistemology, and that disclosing this unarticulated background can change the pre-given rules of the game. And what truly lies beneath all our conscious capacities and practices, according to Dreyfus and Taylor, is our unmediated access to the world—a prereflexive, prelinguistic, and prepropositional kind of bodily-engaged contact. They assert the argument that “the alternative picture which merges once we deconstruct the mediational one, through a consistent metacritical turn, is one of an embodied agent, embedded in a society, and at grips with the world.”⁵

Rehearsing Realism

Six philosophically weighty chapters follow to dismantle the mediational picture and justify the alternative contact position. These chapters are heavy not in the sense that they are difficult to read (both thinkers write lucidly), but in the sense that they serve as a summary and defense of their positions in previous philosophical debates. Dreyfus and Taylor usually begin each chapter by exposing a salient epistemological issue, repudiating claims relating to it, and then offering how the contact theory turns things around. In this review, I highlight the most important points and arguments of each chapter, and reveal areas that I take as ripe for further philosophical consideration. Proceeding from the general critique of representationalism in the first two chapters, parts three to five of the book are dedicated to refuting, in greater detail, the first big assumption that has emerged from mediationalist theory: the primacy of representation. This assumption involves the idea that representation is the central and most crucial part of experience.

The third chapter, which deals with issues surrounding foundationalism, realism, and anti-realism, spends a lot of time discussing Rorty’s antifoundationalist disavowal of the need to engage this dualist representational epistemology. To surmount the realist/anti-realist divide, Rorty argues that we should forsake this split and be satisfied with pragmatic,

⁵ Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 91.

linguistic coping; after all, while things in the universe can be causally independent of us, nothing can be representationally independent.⁶ Dreyfus and Taylor claim that in so doing, Rorty finds himself in a bind: he remains a representationalist philosopher (in arguing for truth *as* belief, its representational substitute) with an *a priori* habit (in deciding that what is empirically given is philosophically uncontroversial). By simply jettisoning the question, they conclude that Rorty's tactic fails to dispel the temptations toward foundationalism—an accusation that is, of course, open to dispute. Contra Rorty, Dreyfus and Taylor defend the importance of coming to terms with our epistemological problems, which the two of them do in their attempt to overturn mediationalism phenomenologically. To go *beneath* the inner/outer epistemological structure, they argue that we have (1) to allow for the possibility of preconceptual understanding; (2) to see that this understanding arises from an embodied agent, determining the significances of things that are impressed upon it by its environment; (3) to realize that this preconceptual locus of sense-making originates from our bodily interaction with the world; and (4) to recognize that we can disengage ourselves from this prior, pervasive mode of engagement. This is the point when we switch to conceptual thinking, which involves the process of forming beliefs that are propositionally renderable.

The fourth chapter, which rehearses the McDowell-Dreyfus debate, provides the opportunity for clarifying what embodied, embedded preconceptual coping is like. McDowell, Dreyfus, and Taylor commonly recognize the futility of what Sellars coined the Myth of the Given, or the idea that knowledge is grounded in our reception of simple, brute data: “givens” that exist independently of us. They also share the belief that our engaged embodiment is responsible for our spontaneous acquisition of persuasive belief and our harmonious attunement with the environment. The difference is that in McDowell's view, this embodied spontaneity is pervaded by conceptuality and takes propositional form, while for Dreyfus and Taylor, our primordial grasp of the world is thoroughly preconceptual. The latter doubt if all human activities can be structured propositionally as McDowell would have us to believe.

I present two of their substantive reasons here. First, Dreyfus and Taylor argue for the importance of prereflexive coping skills that are required for a meaningful encounter with the world. Take Heidegger's example of a badly-placed chalkboard: the reason we understand that it is incorrectly placed is because we are oriented to the *manifestness* of the lecture room. This manifestness, which functions as a prereflexive understanding of what a lecture room is supposed to be, is the condition of possibility for making

⁶ Richard Rorty, “Charles Taylor on Truth” in *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers III* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 86.

judgments about the things in that particular space: “On one level, my action in moving the board is done for a conceptualized reason (it’s badly placed); on another I am responding preconceptually to this meaningful miniworld.”⁷ Second, following Merleau-Ponty, Dreyfus and Taylor contend that human beings are able to cope prelinguistically, e.g., in the case of a child jumping on rocks, without knowing how to articulate what rocks are, and prepropositionally, e.g., in the case of a man skillfully driving to his destination without accounting for his every move. Given skill-intensive examples like these, Dreyfus and Taylor regret McDowell’s resistance to the preconceptual, and allege that their phenomenological contact theory better accounts for the way human beings skillfully function in the world.

The fifth chapter begins with a reiteration of how contact theory helps us realize that everything is a “co-production” between us and the world. But there is still a popular objection—one made salient by neuroscientific developments and experimental films like *The Matrix*—against embodied/embedded understanding that needs to be met: Searle’s brain-in-the-vat challenge. Searle’s Cartesian hypothesis purports that the interactions in the brain are sufficient to produce conscious experiences, casting doubt upon the indispensability of the world in our experiential process. Dreyfus and Taylor engage this problem thoroughly, but I will only mention two of their strongest replies here. First, following Merleau-Ponty, they think that Searle’s and *The Matrix*’s attempt to question the reality of world already manifests a kind of fundamental misunderstanding: to propose the possibility that we can wake up from a fake world to a real world already necessitates our engaged participation within a world. In short, for Dreyfus and Taylor, the fake/real world question is not a meaningful one at all, and is an extreme application of mediationalism. Second, assuming that this framework were possible, the most that they can agree with is that brain states can serve the purpose of providing necessary causal conditions for experience. Dreyfus and Taylor insist, however, that sufficient conditions for meaningful experiences require the agent’s skillful, embodied coping.

After going through an extensive rebuttal of the primacy of representation in the first half of the book, the sixth chapter of *Retrieving Realism* refutes mediational theory’s second assumption: the primacy of the monological. This bias, which grounds our philosophical tradition’s preference for an explicit, decentered, and disengaged way of thinking, is founded on the notion that knowledge is based on individual representation. Against this stance, Dreyfus and Taylor argue for a shift away from the monological by comparing Gadamer’s philosophy with the work of Davidson. The issue at hand here is whether or not it is at all possible to reach universal understanding, given that mediationalism leads us to believe that

⁷ Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 84.

each individual, as well as each culture, would have their own monological scheme of defining human meanings. Both Davidson and Gadamer challenge the problem of unintelligibility and deep incommensurability between persons and cultures, but operate very differently. Davidson's position is epistemologically-based, i.e., I construe you, most of the time, in *my* terms to understand how you think and act in *your* terms. This is how the process of understanding always begins. Dreyfus and Taylor find this position too imposing and vulnerable to ethnocentrism. Gadamer's position, meanwhile, is ontologically-based, i.e., we are all equally in contact with the real, and what is needed for genuine understanding is for the interweaving, and eventually the fusion, of our many different ways of seeing things. Dreyfus and Taylor favor Gadamer's work, and argue that it is a good way of displacing the primacy of the monological with the significance of conversation through contact theory.

Questioning the Grip

The realism that Dreyfus and Taylor defend appears unproblematic at this stage, but they suddenly raise the stakes of their proposal in the seventh chapter. They are not satisfied with the position that everything is a co-production with the world; they also want to uphold the existence of, and our possible access to, the *universe-in-itself*. In short, they argue for the realist claim that the universe exists independently of us. This may seem like a surprising, even paradoxical turn of events, given their commitment to the anti-metaphysical stance of phenomenology and hermeneutics that we have explored in the previous section. But this realism, in fact, is a familiar theme in the works of Dreyfus and Taylor, who have both been in conversation with Rorty about the importance of keeping the for-us/in-itself distinction when we talk about objective truth and natural science.⁸ Dreyfus and Taylor defend a robust realist position: they think that independent reality must exist to ground natural science. They call Rorty a deflationary realist, or someone who thinks that everything, including natural science, can only be understood according to the background of embedded coping. The reason why Dreyfus and Taylor think that their position is superior is because they see evidence that the universe itself supports our ability to optimally cope, or come to

⁸ In the sixties and seventies, Rorty, Dreyfus, and Taylor were involved in much philosophical discussion on the role of interpretation in the natural and the social sciences, as well as human existence more generally. These decades displayed a strong resurgence of interest in hermeneutics, largely precipitated by the publication of Hans Georg-Gadamer's *Truth and Method* [*Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, 1960)]. A good illustration of these debates is a themed issue of *The Review of Metaphysics* in 1980. See *The Review of Metaphysics* 34.1 (1980): Hubert Dreyfus, "Holism and Hermeneutics," 3-23; Charles Taylor, "Understanding in Human Science," 25-38; Richard Rorty, "A Reply to Dreyfus and Taylor," 39-46; and "Rorty, Taylor and Dreyfus: A Discussion," 47-55.

grips, with its nature. Here they rely on Todes, whose phenomenological work shows that human beings are wired to be in sync with the structures of the universe. For Todes, we function effectively because we are oriented to the influence of the earth's vertical field; Dreyfus and Taylor take this to be "the most illuminating instance of the special combination of spontaneity and receptivity required in our stance to the universe in order for us to act effectively in the world."⁹ This is an example of how the "Real" itself facilitates, supports, and limits human experience. Dismissing this, as Rorty does, closes the possibility of realizing that progress in natural science not only elucidates but also improves our contact with an independent universe.

What understanding can we derive from all of this? On the one hand, we can raise the criticism that Dreyfus and Taylor have inevitably fallen back to mediationalism. The inner/outer structure is evident in their division between the realism of our embodied experience and the independent reality of the universe. It is strange that they even seem to be unaware of the self-undermining implications of their claim. On the other, this carefully argued strategy of re-positioning the in-itself in their version of contact theory could also be interpreted as integral to the consolidation of their realist stance. Science, after all, is how they fully retrieve realism and crush the vestiges of anti-realism. Furthermore, we must not forget that they are clear in saying that this hypothesis is true only when we talk about natural science, but not when we talk about other things. This multifaceted dilemma is the crux of the book, and is evidently a rich site for debate. We see this potential at play in the last chapter, where Dreyfus and Taylor officially go beyond the margins of epistemology and cross over to history, religion, politics, culture, and even literature to conclude their work.

What is at stake in the eighth chapter is the hope of transcending the conflicting frameworks that dominate the atmosphere of the contemporary period: scientism (universalism) and subjectivism (relativism). Dreyfus and Taylor propose an ontology of *pluralistic robust realism*, which they recognize is a position that will vex both camps mentioned above. This view is pluralistic since it defends the possibility of "multiple ways of interrogating reality," robustly realist in the sense that these ways reveal independent truths that "require us to revise and adjust our thinking to grasp them," and plural in the belief that unifying these different ways of truth-interrogation "into a single mode of questioning" is bound to fail.¹⁰ In the case of gold, for instance, modern science reveals that it has the atomic number 79, while the religion of Ancient Egypt discloses that this element has a sacred, divine nature. These definitions of gold are incommensurable, yet are both robustly real for Dreyfus and Taylor. The point here is that these kinds of truths are

⁹ Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 136.

¹⁰ Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 154.

accessible only through specific and genuine ways of dealing with the same reality.

At this stage, the realism of Dreyfus and Taylor seems to be swaying toward the mild side of relativism. However, they are quick to re-qualify this in the last section of the book. They offer an example-driven defense of the possibility of scientific, religious, and even moral unification. Compelling arguments in favor of supersession (the gradual correction of previously-held beliefs) and convergence (the gradual reconciliation of plural perspectives) exist, which, according to them, support the idea that unification *may* come to pass in the future. History is brimming with significant examples—Axial revolutions, scientific progress, universal human rights—that heighten the chance of arriving at some general consensus surrounding important areas of human life. With this in mind, Dreyfus and Taylor end their book rather ambivalently: as regards unification, they endorse “just a healthy suspension of judgment about its possibility, along with the recognition that further unification is well worth trying—and even, for some of us, a faith that pushes us to go on trying.”¹¹ But one is left questioning: does this ambivalence destabilize or weaken their joint contact-epistemology in the end? Or does this less dogmatic, even hopeful way of treating the problem help reorient the way we can do philosophy?

Overall, we can clearly see that the level of theoretical and practical ambition of *Retrieving Realism* is very high. It is the kind that only philosophers of the caliber of Dreyfus and Taylor can convincingly tackle. At the same time, this ambition is already present in much of their previously and separately published work, where their dissatisfaction with epistemology, and modern philosophical game-changers like Rorty, Davidson, and McDowell, is evident. We know from their earlier works that Dreyfus and Taylor champion a realist stance and share the belief in the fundamentality of embodied existence and experience. We are also conscious of their praise for the phenomenology of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Todes, as well as their appropriation of the hermeneutics of Gadamer. We are, in short, able to recognize and weigh all of these features without needing to read their new, co-authored book. But I think that there is something indispensable in the experience of being prompted anew about what great philosophical ideas, and great philosophers, can really do to change the way things are. This book is illuminating in this regard.

Dreyfus and Taylor are mindful of the practical impact of philosophical thought, and they raise this as a gentle reminder in the last section of the first chapter. They point out that the mediationalism they are combating is “not only an epistemic stance; it is part of a broader ideal, that of freedom and responsibility, which determines a way of being in the world in

¹¹ Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 168.

general, and not just a way of practicing science.”¹² The mediational stance of critical disengagement has deep and inextricable links to many areas of life, ranging from the way we understand human autonomy, the nature of the moral and social ideals we hold dear, and even the phenomenon of secularism in the West. While these elements can be regarded as modern achievements, we cannot deny that they carry their set of dissatisfactions as well—dissatisfactions that may seem insurmountable and without alternative if we remain trapped within the mediationalist *Bild* that keeps us captive. If we find the things that Dreyfus and Taylor say convincing, then we have yet to constructively reflect on how their version of a contact picture can deeply change our ways. This, in my view, is the real challenge of their ontology that we need to respond to. At least in the area of epistemology, *Retrieving Realism* shows us succinctly where and how to start coming to grips with this task.

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¹² Dreyfus and Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, 24.