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Does the Real World Exist?

Part I: Attacks on Realism

So far I have tried to analyze the nature and structure of those facts that, in a sense I attempted to explain, are dependent on human agreement or acceptance. The whole analysis presupposes a distinction between facts dependent on us and those that exist independently of us, a distinction I originally characterized as one between social and institutional facts on the one hand and brute facts on the other. It is now time to defend the contrast on which the analysis rests, to defend the idea that there is a reality totally independent of us. Furthermore, throughout the book I have been presupposing that in general our statements when true correspond to facts, and it is now also time to defend this presupposition. These defenses are made more pressing by the current philosophical scene in which it is common both to deny the existence of a reality independent of human representations and to

deny that true statements correspond to facts. This chapter and the next are about realism; the final chapter is about the correspondence theory of truth. A thorough discussion of these problems would require at least another book, but for the purposes of this book I need at least a brief exposition of certain presuppositions behind our contemporary commonsense scientific world view because the rest of this book, not to mention that world view, depends on these presuppositions. These last three chapters are efforts at philosophical housekeeping, trying to clean up the mess, so to speak.

Some Presuppositions of Our Contemporary World View

In order to understand what is at stake, we need to get some of the presuppositions of our world view out into the open, where we can have a look at them. A formal feature of our world view is the distinction between objectivity and subjectivity that I tried to explain in Chapter 1. In addition to the usual problems of vagueness and marginal cases—problems that are not serious—this distinction is systematically ambiguous between an epistemic and an ontological sense. In light of the distinction between epistemic objectivity/subjectivity and ontological objectivity/subjectivity, we can identify the following structural features of our world view.

1. The world (or alternatively, reality or the universe) exists independently of our representations of it. This view I will call "external realism." I will refine its formulation later.

2. Human beings have a variety of interconnected ways of having access to and representing features of the world to themselves. These include perception, thought, language, beliefs, and desires as well as pictures, maps, diagrams, etc. Just to have a general term I will call these collectively "representations." A feature

of representations so defined is that they all have intentionality, both *intrinsic* intentionality, as in beliefs and perceptions, and *derived* intentionality, as in maps and sentences.

3. Some of those representations, such as beliefs and statements, purport to be about and to represent how things are in reality. To the extent that they succeed or fail, they are said to be true or false, respectively. They are true if and only if they correspond to the facts in reality. This is (a version of) the correspondence theory of truth.

4. Systems of representation, such as vocabularies and conceptual schemes generally, are human creations, and to that extent arbitrary. It is possible to have any number of different systems of representations for representing the same reality. This thesis is called "conceptual relativity." Again, I will refine its formulation later.

5. Actual human efforts to get true representations of reality are influenced by all sorts of factors—cultural, economic, psychological, and so on. Complete epistemic objectivity is difficult, sometimes impossible, because actual investigations are always from a point of view, motivated by all sorts of personal factors, and within a certain cultural and historical context.

6. Having knowledge consists in having true representations for which we can give certain sorts of justification or evidence. Knowledge is thus by definition objective in the epistemic sense, because the criteria for knowledge are not arbitrary, and they are impersonal.

Knowledge can be naturally classified by subject matter, but there is no special subject matter called "science" or "scientific knowledge." There is just knowledge, and "science" is a name we apply to areas where knowledge has become systematic, as in physics or chemistry.

In light of the distinction between the epistemic and ontological

senses of the objective/subjective distinction, we can say: Proposition 1 (external realism) is very close to the view that there is an ontologically objective reality. The two claims are not exactly equivalent, because the claim that there is a reality independent of representations (external realism) is not exactly equivalent to the claim that there is a reality completely independent of minds (ontological objectivity). The reason for this distinction is that some mental states, such as pains, are ontologically subjective, but they are not representations. They are representation independent but not mind independent. Ontological objectivity implies external realism, because mind independence implies representation independence. But not conversely. Pains, for example, can be representation independent without being mind independent. Proposition 2 implies that ontological subjectivity gives us epistemic access to all the reality to which we have access, whether ontologically subjective or objective, whether epistemically subjective or objective. Proposition 5 says epistemic objectivity is often hard to obtain; and Proposition 6 says that if we have genuine knowledge, we have epistemic objectivity *by definition*.

I hope the reader finds these six propositions so obvious as to wonder why I am boring him or her with such platitudes, but I have to report that a great deal of confusion surrounds them. Propositions 1 and 3, realism and the correspondence theory, respectively, are often confused with each other; worse yet, they are both often supposed to have been refuted. Several philosophers think that proposition 4, conceptual relativity, creates a problem for realism; some think that it refutes it. Many philosophers think that proposition 3, the correspondence theory, has been independently refuted. Several literary theorists think that proposition 5 creates a problem for the very possibility of objective knowledge as stated in proposition 6, and perhaps even refutes realism as articulated by proposition 1.

So I fear there is nothing to do but slow down and go over at least some of these matters in low gear. Let us begin by asking,

What Is Realism?

As a preliminary formulation, I have defined realism as the view that the world exists independently of our representations of it. This has the consequence that if we had never existed, if there had never been any representations—any statements, beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, etc.—most of the world would have remained unaffected. Except for the little corner of the world that is constituted or affected by our representations, the world would still have existed and would have been exactly the same as it is now. It has the further consequence that when we all die, and all our representations die with us, most features of the world will remain totally unaffected; they will go on exactly as before. For example, let us assume that there is a mountain in the Himalayas that I represent to myself and others as "Mount Everest." Mount Everest exists independently of how or whether I or anyone else ever represented it or anything else. Furthermore, there are many features of Mount Everest, for example, the sort of features that I represent if I make a statement such as "Mt. Everest has snow and ice near its summit," which would have remained totally unaffected if no one had ever represented them in any fashion and will not be affected by the demise of these or any other representations. One might put this point by saying that there are many language-independent features, facts, states of affairs, etc.; but I have put the point more generally in terms of "representations," because I want to note that the world exists independently not only of language but also of thought, perception, belief, etc. The point is that, in large part, reality does not depend on intentionality in any form.

In the history of philosophy the word "realism" has been used with a wide variety of meanings. In the medieval sense, realism is the doctrine that universals have a real existence. Nowadays one hears talk of "modal realism," "ethical realism," "intentional realism," "mathematical realism," and so on. For the purposes of this discussion I am stipulating that "external realism" and "realism"

("ER" for short) name the view sketched in the previous paragraph. I use the metaphor of "external" to mark the fact that the view in question holds that reality exists outside of, or external to, our system of representation.

Before examining arguments for and against realism we need to distinguish it from other views with which it is often identified. The first confusion is to suppose that realism is identical with or at least implies the correspondence theory of truth. But realism is not a theory of truth and it does not imply any theory of truth. Strictly speaking, realism is consistent with any theory of truth because it is a theory of ontology and not of the meaning of "true." It is not a semantic theory at all. It is thus possible to hold ER and deny the correspondence theory.[1] On a normal interpretation, the correspondence theory implies realism since it implies that there is a reality to which statements correspond if they are true; but realism does not by itself imply the correspondence theory, since it does not imply that "truth" is the name of a relation of correspondence between statements and reality.

Another misconception is to suppose that there is something epistemic about realism. Thus, for example, Hilary Putnam writes[2]

> the whole content of Realism lies in the claim that it makes sense to think of a God's Eye View (or better a view from nowhere).

But that is not the content of realism as normally construed. On the contrary, the whole idea of a "view" is already epistemic and ER is not epistemic. It would be consistent with realism to suppose that any kind of "view" of reality is quite impossible. Indeed, on one interpretation, Kant's doctrine of things in themselves is a conception of a reality that is inaccessible to any "view." I realize that since the seventeenth century the most common arguments against realism have been epistemic—"all we can ever really know are our own sense data," that sort of thing—but the thesis under attack, realism, is not as it stands an epistemic thesis at all. I will have more to say later about the epistemic arguments against realism.

A third mistake, also common, is to suppose that realism is committed to the theory that there is one best vocabulary for describing reality, that reality itself must determine how it should be described. But once again, ER as defined above has no such implication. The view that the world exists independently of our representations of it does not imply that there is a privileged vocabulary for describing it. It is consistent with ER to claim the thesis of conceptual relativity (proposition 4), that different and even incommensurable vocabularies can be constructed for describing different aspects of reality for our various different purposes.

To summarize these points: realism, as I am using the term, is not a theory of truth, it is not a theory of knowledge, and it is not a theory of language. If one insists on a pigeonhole, one could say that realism is an *ontological* theory: It says that there exists a reality totally independent of our representations.

In the philosophical tradition there is a pervasive further ambiguity in the notion of realism that I need to expose and remove. Typically philosophers who discuss these issues treat them as if they concerned how the world is in fact. They think the issues between, say, realism and idealism are about the existence of matter or about objects in space and time. This is a very deep mistake. Properly understood, realism is not a thesis about how the world is in fact. We could be totally mistaken about how the world is in every detail and realism could still be true. *Realism is the view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations. Realism does not say how things are but only that there is a way that they are.* And "things" in the previous two sentences does not mean material objects or even objects. It is, like the "it" in "It is raining," not a referring expression.

It will seem presumptuous of me to claim that the issues do not concern specific claims about matter, and about material objects in space and time, if that is in fact what the disputants thought they were arguing about. But I hope to make it clear that

the issues could not be about such specific claims. Realism could not be a theory asserting the existence of Mt. Everest, for example; because if it should turn out that Mt. Everest never existed, realism remains untouched. And what goes for Mt. Everest goes for material objects in general. But what if it should turn out that material objects do not exist or even that space and time do not exist? Well, in a sense it already has turned out that way, because we now think of material objects as collections of "particles" that are not themselves material objects but are best thought of as points of mass/energy; and absolute space and time have given way to sets of relations to coordinate systems. Not only is none of this inconsistent with realism; rather, as I will argue later, it all presupposes realism. It presupposes that there is a way things are that is independent of how we represent how things are.

But let us continue with some science fiction thought experiments. Suppose it should turn out that physical reality is causally dependent on consciousness in such a way that with the last death of the last conscious agent all of physical reality blows up in a kind of Negative Big Bang. Would that still be consistent with external realism? It would, because the postulated dependence of matter on consciousness is a causal dependence like any other. When realism claims that reality exists independently of consciousness and of other forms of representation, no causal claim is made or implied. Rather, the claim is that reality is not *logically constituted* by representations, that there is no logical dependence.

"But suppose it should turn out that the only things that exist or ever did exist are states of disembodied consciousness. Surely that would be inconsistent with realism and a vindication of idealism or at least some other version of antirealism."

No, not necessarily. Realism does not say that the world had to turn out one way rather than another, but only that there is a way that it did turn out that is independent of our representations of it. Representations are one thing, the reality represented another,

and this point is true even if it should turn out that the only actual reality is mental states. One way to see the difference between realism and antirealism is this: on the realist view if it turned out that only conscious states exist, then ships and shoes and sealing wax do not exist. But the claim that ships and shoes and sealing wax do not exist is a claim about external reality like any other. It presupposes realism as much as the claim that they do exist. On the antirealist view, such things, if they exist, are necessarily constituted by our representations, and they could not have existed independently of representations. For example, according to Berkeley, ships and shoes and sealing wax must be collections of states of consciousness. For the antirealist it is impossible that there should be a mind-independent reality. For the realist, even if there were no material objects in fact, there would still be a representation-independent reality, for the nonexistence of material objects would just be one feature of that representation-independent reality. The world could have been different, consistent with realism, but in fact it turned out that it contains material phenomena in space and time.

(Alternative formulation: For the realist, it not only *could have* turned out that there are objects other than representations, but in fact it *did* turn out that way. For the antirealist it could not have turned out that there are representation-independent objects.)

Strange as it may seem, realism has recently come under attack both in philosophy and in other disciplines. Thinkers as diverse as Michael Dummett, Nelson Goodman, Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida, Humberto Maturana, Francesco Varela, and Terry Winograd are often interpreted (not always correctly, I believe) as challenging our naive assumption that there exists a reality totally independent of our representations of it. Some scientists have even claimed that modern physics is inconsistent with realism; thus J. R. Wheeler writes,

> The universe does not exist "out there" independent of us. We are inescapably involved in bringing about that which appears to be happening. We are not only observers, we are participators . . . in making [the] past as well as the present and the future.[3]

There are several disquieting things about all these attacks on realism. The first is that the arguments against our commonsense idea that there exists an independent reality are often vague and obscure. Sometimes no clearly stated arguments are even presented. Second, the alternative views, the views that are supposed to be presented in opposition to realism, are often equally obscure and unclearly stated. Even among analytic philosophers many recent discussions of realism are symptomatic of the general looseness that has set in over the past couple of decades. What exactly are the propositions being asserted? What exactly are those denied? And what exactly are the arguments for both assertion and denial? You will look in vain for answers to these questions in most discussions of these matters. I think, furthermore, that this general carelessness is not accidental. It is somehow satisfying to our will to power to think that "we" make the world, that reality itself is but a social construct, alterable at will and subject to future changes as "we" see fit. Equally, it seems offensive that there should be an independent reality of brute facts—blind, uncomprehending, indifferent, and utterly unaffected by our concerns. And all of this is part of the general intellectual atmosphere that makes antirealist versions of "poststructuralism" such as deconstruction seem intellectually acceptable, even exciting. But once you state the claims and arguments of the antirealists out in the open, naked and undisguised, they tend to look fairly ridiculous. Hence the obscurity and even obscurantism of many (not all) of these discussions.

So I have a problem. I said I would defend realism against the attacks made on it, but frankly I have trouble finding any powerful attacks that seem worth answering. Maturana rejects the idea of "an objective reality" in favor of the idea that nervous systems, as

autopoietic systems, construct their own reality.[4] The argument appears to be that since we have no conception of, and no access to, reality except through the social construction of realities in the "consensual domains," constructed by autopoietic systems, there is no reality existing independently of biological systems. Against this view I want to say, From the fact that our knowledge/conception/picture of reality is constructed by human brains in human interactions, it does not follow that the *reality* of which we have the knowledge/conception/picture is constructed by human brain in human interactions.* It is just a non sequitur, a genetic fallacy, to infer from the collective neurophysiological causal explanation of our knowledge of the external world to the nonexistence of the external world.

Winograd points out that the same sentence, e.g., "There is water in the refrigerator," can be used to make a false statement relative to one set of background interests, a true statement relative to another.[5] From this he concludes that reality does not exist independently of our representations. Once again, as with Maturana, the conclusion does not follow. The interest-relativity of our representations of reality does not show that the reality represented is itself interest-relative. Like Maturana, Winograd tries to derive conclusions about reality from features of our representations of reality. Several "postmodernist" literary theorists have argued that because all knowledge is socially constructed and subject to all the arbitrariness and will to power of any social construction, that therefore realism is somehow threatened. As George Levine writes, "Antirealism, even literary antirealism, depends on a sense of the impossibility of unmediated knowledge."[6] Derrida, as far as I can tell, does not have an argument. He simply declares that there is nothing outside of texts (*Il n'y a pas de "hors texte"*). And in any case, in a subsequent polemical response to

*There is, furthermore, a problem about the human brains and the human interactions themselves. Are they also supposed to be constructed by human interactions?

some objections of mine, he apparently takes it all back: he says that all he meant by the apparently spectacular declaration that there is nothing outside of *texts* is the banality that everything exists in some *context* or other![7] What is one to do then, in the face of an array of weak or even nonexistent arguments for a conclusion that seems preposterous?

The strategy I will follow is to take what I think are the most powerful arguments against external realism and answer them. Suppose that I were convinced by antirealism; what in particular might have convinced me? Or if that seems too farfetched, suppose the fate of humanity rested on my convincing someone else of antirealism, what arguments would I use? I will consider three arguments: the argument from *conceptual relativity,* the *verificationist* argument, and what I will call the *Ding an sich* argument.

The Argument from Conceptual Relativity Against Realism

The conceptual relativity argument is that proposition 4 above, conceptual relativity, refutes proposition 1, external realism.

The idea of conceptual relativity is an old and, I believe, a correct one. Any system of classification or individuation of objects, any set of categories for describing the world, indeed, any system of representation at all is conventional, and to that extent arbitrary. The world divides up the way we divide it, and if we are ever inclined to think that our present way of dividing it is the right one, or is somehow inevitable, we can always imagine alternative systems of classification. To illustrate this for yourself, take a piece of chalk and draw a line across a portion of the book in front of you and then onto the table and around in a circle and back to the book to connect. Now give a name to this new sort of object made of portions of surfaces of books plus tables delimited by a chalk line. Call this object a "klurg." We do not have a use for this concept in our language. But it would be easy to imagine a culture

where klurgs are of great religious significance, where they can be delineated only by sacred virgins working under water and their obliteration merits the death penalty. But if "klurg" is a new concept with previously unheard-of truth conditions, there is no limit to how many new concepts we can form. Because any true description of the world will always be made within some vocabulary, some system of concepts, conceptual relativity has the consequence that any true description is always made relative to some system of concepts that we have more or less arbitrarily selected for describing the world.

So characterized, conceptual relativism seems completely true, indeed, platitudinous. However, several philosophers have supposed that it is inconsistent with external realism, and consequently, that if we accept conceptual relativism, we are forced to deny realism. But if this claim were really true, we ought to be able to state the two theses precisely enough for the inconsistency to be quite obvious.

Let external realism be the view that:

ER1: Reality exists independently of our representations of it.

Let the relevant thesis of conceptual relativism be the view that:

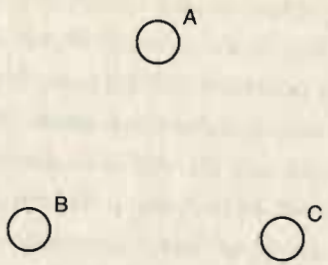
CR1: All representations of reality are made relative to some more or less arbitrarily selected set of concepts.

So stated, these two views do not even have the *appearance* of inconsistency. The first just says that there is something out there to be described. The second says that we have to select a set of concepts and a vocabulary to describe it. So why would anyone suppose that the second entails the negation of the first? The answer is that if we accept conceptual relativism, and try to conjoin it with realism, we appear to get inconsistencies.

Consider the following example from Putnam.[8] Imagine that there is some part of the world as shown in Figure 7.1.

How many objects are there in this miniworld? Well, according to Carnap's system of arithmetic (and according to common

Figure 7.1



sense), there are three; but according to Lesniewski and other Polish logicians, there are seven objects in this world, counted as follows:

1=A
2=B
3=C
4=A + B
5=A + C
6=B + C
7=A + B + C

So how many objects are there really in the imagined world? Are there really three or really seven? There is no absolute answer to these questions. The only answers we can give are relative to the arbitrary choice of conceptual schemes. The same sentence, e.g., "There are exactly three objects in the world," will be true in one scheme, false in the other. The heart of the argument is that external realism leads to inconsistencies because it allows for inconsistent descriptions of the supposedly independently existing reality.

The form in which the argument occurs in Goodman is that we characteristically make reality or, as Goodman would prefer to say, we "make worlds" by drawing certain boundaries rather than others. For example, Goodman says,

> Now as we thus make constellations by picking out and putting together certain stars rather than others, so we make stars by drawing certain boundaries rather than others. Nothing dictates whether the sky shall be marked off into constellations or other objects, we have to make what we find, be it the Great Dipper, Sirius, food, fuel, or a stereo system.[9]

Goodman rejects realism and evades the inconsistencies by relativizing the facts described to a "world" that we make. Putnam says that instead of thinking that there is a mind-independent reality, we should say rather that "the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world."[10]

But are these supposed contradictions really a problem? About the miniworld example, a realist who was a convinced conceptual relativist would say that there really are three objects, as the criterion for counting objects has been set in the first system of classification, really seven as the criterion has been set in the second. And this answer removes the apparent contradiction, not by modifying or abandoning external realism but by simply pointing out that the criterion for counting objects has been set in two different ways. Thus the same sentence, e.g., "There are exactly three objects in the world," can now be used to make two quite different and independent statements, one of which is true, one false. But the real world does not care how we describe it and it remains the same under the various different descriptions we give of it.

Some of the examples of conceptual relativism given in the literature are more arcane and complicated than the ones I have given, but the principle they employ is the same, and I cannot see that anything is gained by the complexity. They all are designed to show that different conceptual systems will generate different and apparently inconsistent descriptions of the same "reality." As far as I can see there is nothing in any of them that is inconsistent with external realism. The appearance of inconsistency is an illusion

and, on a natural interpretation of these views, there is no inconsistency whatever in accepting the most naive version of realism, and accepting any version at all of conceptual relativism.*

Think of the relation of realism and conceptual relativism like this: Take a corner of the world, say, the Himalayas, and think of it as it was prior to the existence of any human beings. Now imagine that humans come along and represent the facts in various different ways. They have different vocabularies, different systems for making maps, different ways of counting one mountain, two mountains, the same mountain, etc. Next, imagine that eventually the humans all cease to exist. Now what happens to the existence of the Himalayas and all the facts about the Himalayas in the course of these vicissitudes? Absolutely nothing. Different descriptions of facts, objects, etc., came and went, but the facts, objects, etc., remained unaffected. (Does anyone really doubt this?)

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*What has gone wrong? In Putnam's case a close look at the texts suggests that he is lumping at least two logically independent theses under his label, "Metaphysical Realism."

First: Reality exists independently of our representations of it.

Second: There is one and only one correct conceptual scheme for describing reality.

The first is what I have been calling external realism; let's call the second the theory of the "Privileged Conceptual Scheme" (PCS). Putnam sees correctly that CR refutes PCS. And since you can always refute a conjunction by refuting one conjunct, if metaphysical realism is the conjunction of ER and PCS, then metaphysical realism has been refuted. But you do not refute both conjuncts by refuting just one; so the falsity of PCS leaves ER standing untouched. Putnam's writings give the impression that he thinks that by refuting PCS he has refuted ER. Perhaps he does not think that the "refutation" touches ER, in which case a bald assertion in favor of ER would have been helpful to his readers. But he makes no such assertion; on the contrary, he endorses a view he calls "internal realism." I do not think there is a coherent position of "internal realism" that is halfway between external realism, as I have defined it, and out-and-out antirealism, which Putnam also claims to reject.

The fact that alternative conceptual schemes allow for different descriptions of the same reality, and that there are no descriptions of reality outside all conceptual schemes, has no bearing whatever on the truth of realism.

But what about the possibility, raised by Goodman, of inconsistent descriptions made relative to different conceptual schemes? There is no substitute for going carefully through examples, so let us consider a case of how external realism deals with alternative vocabularies. Let us suppose that I am a complete, naive external realist where weight, i.e., the gravitational attraction of masses at the earth's surface, is concerned. I think that I really weigh 160 no matter what anybody thinks. But wait! I weigh 160 in pounds but only 73 in kilograms. So how much do I weigh really: 160 or 73? I hope it is obvious that both answers are correct, though each is incomplete. The appearance of inconsistency is only an appearance, because the claim that I weigh 160 in pounds is consistent with the claim that I weigh 73 in kilograms. External realism allows for an infinite number of true descriptions of the same reality made relative to different conceptual schemes. "What is my aim in philosophy? To teach you to turn disguised nonsense into obvious nonsense."[11] It is disguised nonsense to say that conceptual relativism implies antirealism, obvious nonsense to say that I cannot, at the same time, weigh both 160 (in pounds) and 73 (in kilograms).

Furthermore, if conceptual relativity is to be used as an argument against realism, it seems to presuppose realism, because it presupposes a language-independent reality that can be carved up or divided up in different ways, by different vocabularies. Think of the example of alternative arithmetics: Putnam points out that one way to describe the miniworld is to say there are three objects, another way is to say there are seven objects. But notice that this very claim presupposes something there to be described prior to the application of the description; otherwise there is no way we could even understand the example. And when Goodman writes, "We make stars by drawing certain boundaries

rather than others," there is no way to understand that claim except by presupposing something there on which we can draw boundaries. Unless there is already a territory on which we can draw boundaries, there is no possibility of drawing any boundaries.

If we try to take these arguments as counting against ER, we commit a massive use-mention fallacy: From the fact that a *description* can only be made relative to a set of linguistic categories, it does not follow that the *facts/objects/states of affairs,/etc., described* can only *exist* relative to a set of categories. Conceptual relativism, properly understood, is an account of how we fix the application of our terms: What counts as a correct application of the term "cat" or "kilogram" or "canyon" (or "klurg") is up to us to decide and is to that extent arbitrary. *But once we have fixed the meaning of such terms in our vocabulary by arbitrary definitions, it is no longer a matter of any kind of relativism or arbitrariness whether representation-independent features of the world satisfy those definitions, because the features of the world that satisfy or fail to satisfy the definitions exist independently of those or any other definitions.* We arbitrarily define the word "cat" in such and such a way; and only relative to such and such definitions can we say, "That's a cat." But once we have made the definitions and once we have applied the concepts relative to the system of definitions, whether or not something satisfies our definition is no longer arbitrary or relative. That we use the word "cat" the way we do is up to us; that there is an object that exists independently of that use, and satisfies that use, is a plain matter of (absolute, intrinsic, mind-independent) fact. Contrary to Goodman, we do not make "worlds"; we make *descriptions* that the actual world may fit or fail to fit. But all this implies that there is a reality that exists independently of our system of concepts. Without such a reality, there is nothing to apply the concept to.

In order that we should get a version of conceptual relativism that is inconsistent with external realism, we would have to have a version that implies that the same statement (not the same sentence, but the same statement) could be true of the world in one conceptual system but false of the world in another conceptual system. I have not seen any example of this that is remotely plausible. The standard examples are something like this: Assume that we have different models for representing some domain of reality, say, Aristotelian physics vs. Newtonian physics or the Mercator projection of the earth's surface vs. a standard globe representation of the earth's surface. Now, on the Mercator projection, Greenland occupies a bigger area than Brazil, but on the globe, Greenland occupies a smaller area than Brazil. So don't we have here two models, both true of the same reality, but, in fact, inconsistent with each other? The answer is no. The Mercator projection is just inaccurate about the relative size of Brazil and Greenland. It is a well-known fact that certain models, e.g., Aristotelian physics and the Mercator projection, are mistaken about or distort certain features of the world.

All true statements about the world can consistently be affirmed together. Indeed, if they could not consistently be affirmed together, they could not all be true. Of course, we are always confronted with the problems of vagueness, indeterminacy, family resemblance, open texture, contextual dependency, the incommensurability of theories, ambiguity, the idealization involved in theory construction, alternative interpretations, the underdetermination of theory by evidence, and all the rest of it. But these are features of our systems of representation, not of the representation-independent reality that some of these systems can be used, more less adequately, to represent. Often the same sentence can be used to assert a truth in one conceptual scheme and a falsehood in another conceptual scheme. But this, as we have seen over and over, does not show a genuine inconsistency.

The Verificationist Argument

Twentieth-century philosophy has been obsessed with language and meaning, and that is why it is perhaps inevitable that some-

body would come up with the idea that nothing at all exists apart from language and meaning. Earlier centuries were obsessed with experience and knowledge, and correspondingly philosophers came up with the idea that there is no reality independent of experience and knowledge. In the history of Western philosophy since the seventeenth century, the most common argument against realism has been derived from epistemic considerations.

I believe the basic philosophical motivation behind verificationists' arguments against realism is to try to eliminate the possibility of skepticism by removing the gulf between appearance and reality that makes skepticism possible in the first place. If reality consists in nothing but our experiences, if our experiences are somehow constitutive of reality, then the form of skepticism that says we can never get out of our experiences to the reality beyond is answered.

This is a persistent urge in philosophy. Kant's transcendental idealism is a more sophisticated variant of it than one finds in Berkeley, and the same urge survives in the late twentieth century in the various efforts to analyze meaning in "public" terms, or even "behavioristically," so that there will be no private residue about which one might doubt that one had really understood what other people meant by the use of an expression.

Even if I am right about this diagnosis, however, it doesn't answer the actual arguments, so I will now present what I take to be the most powerful verificationists' argument against realism: Here is how it goes:

> Ask yourself what you really know, I mean *really* know. Well, you might say you really know that you are sitting on a chair, that there is a desk in front of you, that you are looking at a computer screen. But if you think about it, you will see that what you really know is that you are having certain experiences; so when you make these claims about a chair or a desk or a computer screen, either you are talking about your experiences or you are talking about something you don't really know. Furthermore, if you tried to talk about something other than experiences you would be talking about something that you couldn't know. If you ask how you know about the world, the answer has to be: from your experiences. But then you are faced with a dilemma. Either your claims to know simply report the content of your experiences or they go beyond those contents. If the former, then there is nothing known except the content of your experiences. If the latter, then you are making claims that you cannot validate, because all validation rests on experience, and you are ex hypothesi making claims that go beyond what you experience.
>
> For example, I claim to know there is a desk in front of me now. What does such a claim mean? Well, all I have direct knowledge of are these tactile and visual experiences, and all I—or anyone else—could ever have direct knowledge of are more such experiences. So what does my original claim amount to? Either it amounts to the claim that there are actual and possible experiences ("sense data" in the twentieth-century jargon, "ideas" and "impressions" in that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), or if something more is claimed, then it must be a claim about something totally unknowable and inaccessible to any investigation. Such a claim is empirically empty. The conclusion is obvious: experience is constitutive of reality.

This argument occurs in several authors and the conclusion has been stated in a variety of vocabularies: Objects are collections of ideas (Berkeley). Objects are permanent possibilities of sensation (Mill). Empirical statements can be translated without residue into statements about sense data (twentieth-century phenomenalism). Berkeley summarizes this argument neatly when he says, "If matter did exist we could never know it, if it does not exist everything remains the same."

There are, it seems to me, two strands to the argument. The first is, all we can ever perceive are our own experiences. There-

fore, if there is supposed to be a reality beyond our experiences, it is unknowable, and ultimately unintelligible. The second is an extension of the first. It says the only basis we have for claims about the real world are our experiences. Therefore, if claims about the real world go beyond the content of our experiences, then ex hypothesi we are postulating something for which we can have no epistemic basis.

I believe both strands are mistaken. Let us consider each in turn. It is indeed the case that whenever one consciously perceives anything, one has certain experiences. For example, for every visual perception there is a corresponding visual experience. In the formal mode of speech, to report "I see the table" implies "I am having a certain sort of visual experience." But from the fact that the visual experience is an essential component of the visual perception, it does not follow that the visual experience is that which is perceived. It does not follow, in short, that one does not have direct access to the real world whenever one employs one's perceptual apparatus to perceive it. Thus, for example, right now I see my desk in front of me. In such a case, I simply perceive the desk. In so doing, I have a perceptual experience, but the perceptual experience is neither the object of perception nor is it the evidence on the basis of which I conclude that there is a desk there. I do not "conclude" on the basis of "evidence" that there is a desk here; rather, I simply see it. So the first strand in the argument, namely, that all we have access to in perceptual experiences is the content of the perception itself, is mistaken.[12]

I believe that the second is also mistaken. Let us grant, for the sake of argument, that the epistemic basis for my present claim that there is a desk in front of me is the existence of my present sense experiences and grant also that the claim that there is a table there—if it is understood in the commonsense, naive realist way—states more than a mere summary of statements about my experiences. What follows? Does it follow that the claim that there is a table there states something unknowable, something that goes beyond any possible evidence or other epistemic basis? It does not follow. From the fact that the epistemic basis for my knowledge is my present experiences, it does not follow that all I can know are my experiences. On the contrary, the way we described the example was precisely as a case where my experiences give me access to something that is not itself an experience.

It is a familiar point in philosophy that in general empirical claims go beyond the epistemic bases on which they are made. There would not be much point, for example, in making scientific hypotheses if they were just summaries of the available evidence.

However, at this point, the defender of the antirealist position will want to say the following:

> In presenting these answers to the antirealist argument, you have tacitly presupposed that you are really perceiving mind-independent objects in the real world, but that is precisely what you are not entitled to assume. The whole point of the argument is that you could be having exactly these experiences and there not be any desk there. But if that is the case, then it doesn't matter whether we think of the experiences as providing the "evidence" for your "conclusion" that there is a desk there. The point is that the only basis that you have for your confidence that there is a desk there is the presence of these sense data, and if the desk is supposed to be something over and above the sense data, they would not be sufficient to justify that confidence because you could be having exactly these experiences and be totally mistaken. The postulation of an external reality is essentially the postulation of something unknowable and ultimately unintelligible.

What is the answer to this? In this discussion I am not trying to answer general skepticism. That is a set of questions that goes beyond the scope of this book. So for the sake of this argument let us just grant that I might be having exactly these experiential contents and be having a total hallucination. I might be subject to all the horrors of traditional epistemology: I might be a brain in a vat,

I might be deceived by an evil demon, I might be dreaming, etc. But it does not follow that my claim that there is a desk in front of me is simply a summary of the experiences that prompt me to make the claim. That is, even if skepticism is right, and I am systematically mistaken, *what I am mistaken about are the features of the real world.* The possibility of being systematically mistaken about those features does not show that my claims about them are just summaries of statements about my sense experiences.

These are ancient battlegrounds, and the landscape is much devastated by epistemic wars, but I believe the basic logical geography of the philosophical terrain is simple and readily discernible: The verificationist argument for antirealism is as follows:

1. All we have access to in perception are the contents of our own experiences.

2. The only epistemic basis we can have for claims about the external world are our perceptual experiences.

Therefore,

3. The only reality we can meaningfully speak of is the reality of perceptual experiences.

I have argued that statement 1 is false. We typically perceive objects and states of affairs in the world. Furthermore, I have argued that statement 2, though true, does not imply statement 3. It is a mistake to suppose that empirical claims are only meaningful to the extent that they are understood as summaries of their evidentiary or epistemic bases. Finally, I have claimed that the possibility of radical error, the possibility raised by skepticism, is irrelevant. Even if we are systematically mistaken, à la traditional skepticism, statement 3 does not follow. On the contrary, what we are mistaken about, if skepticism is right, is the real world.

I realize that there are other versions of the verificationists' argument for antirealism, but I believe this version has been the most pervasive in the empiricist tradition from the seventeenth century right through logical positivism. I also realize that in this entire tradition epistemology, in general, and the attempt to answer Cartesian skepticism, in particular, were central to the entire philosophical enterprise. I regard these as mistakes. Epistemology has an important but certainly not a central place in the enterprise of philosophy. The deeper reason why epistemological considerations of the sort that I have been discussing could never provide a sound argument for antirealism is that in order even to state these considerations, we have to presuppose realism. I will return to this point in the next chapter.

The *Ding an Sich* Argument

There is another argument against ER worth mentioning, the argument concerning things in themselves, the *Ding an sich* argument.

It is hard to find an explicit version of this argument in contemporary philosophy, but it keeps coming up in the oral tradition. It is best to think of it as a combination of the argument from conceptual relativity and the argument from verification. Here is how it goes:

> When we deal with the world in perception, thought, inquiry, etc., we are always working from within some conceptual scheme. Even our so-called "experiences" are never directly of "reality" but are permeated by our concepts, and can refer ultimately only to other experiences. There is no God's-eye view from which we can survey the relations between our representations and the reality they are alleged to represent, to see whether they are really adequate to reality. There is no way we can see these relations from the side; rather, we are always inside our representations—our beliefs, experiences, utterances, etc. Because we can't get outside the set of our representations to scrutinize reality

directly, because there is no nonrepresentational standpoint from which we can survey the relations between representation and reality, and because there is not even the possibility of assessing the adequacy of our representations by measuring them against things in themselves, talk of a transcendent reality must be just so much nonsense. All the reality we can ever really get at, have access to, is the reality that is internal to our system of representations. Within the system there is a possibility of realism, internal realism, but the idea of a reality outside the system is as empty as Kant's notion of the *Ding on sich*, a thing in itself, beyond the grasp not only of our knowledge but of our language and thought. What external realism offers us is an unthinkable something, indescribable, inaccessible, unknowable, unspeakable, and ultimately nonsensical. The real problem with such a realism is not that it is false, but that it is ultimately unintelligible.

What are we to make of this argument? Once again, if we try to state it as an explicit argument, with a set of premises and a conclusion, it is hard to see how the conclusion is supposed to follow.

Premise: Any cognitive state occurs as part of a set of cognitive states and within a cognitive system.

From this premise it is supposed to follow that:

Conclusion 1: It is impossible to get outside of all cognitive states and systems to survey the relationships between them and the reality that they are used to cognize.

And from this in turn it is supposed to follow that:

Conclusion 2: No cognition is ever of a reality that exists independently of cognition.

It seems to me that, properly understood, conclusion 1 does indeed follow from the premise. All representation occurs within a set of representations and within some representational system.

Hence, any representation of the relation between the set of representational states and the representational system, on the one hand, and the reality represented, on the other, also occurs within some representational system. But so what? It simply does not follow from the fact that all cognition is within a cognitive system that no cognition is ever directly of a reality that exists independently of all cognition. Conclusion 2 just does not follow. Indeed, to suppose it does follow seems to be a mistake of the same form as the mistake committed by old-time idealism.

Diagnosis of the Problem

I now want to offer a partial diagnosis of why it has become fashionable even among technically competent philosophers to attack realism, and to advance such feeble arguments against it.

One of the oldest urges in Western philosophy is to think that somehow or other truth and reality should coincide. That somehow or other, if there really were such things as truth and reality, as we normally think of them, then truth would have to provide an exact mirror of reality. The nature of reality itself would have to provide the exact structure of true statements. A classical statement of this position is in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*,[13] but I believe the idea is as old as Plato. When the philosopher despairs of achieving an exact isomorphism between the structure of reality and the structure of true representations, the temptation is to think that somehow or other our naive notions of truth and reality have been discredited. But they have not been discredited. What has been discredited is a certain misconception of the relationship between truth and reality.

There is a simple but deep reason why truth and reality cannot coincide in a way that many philosophers think that the naive external realist is committed to their coincidence. The reason is this: All representation, and a fortiori all truthful representation, is always under certain aspects and not others. The aspectual character of all representations derives from such facts as that repre-

sentation is always made from within a certain conceptual scheme and from a certain point of view. So, for example, if I describe the substance in front of me as water, the same piece of reality is represented as if I describe it as H_2O. But, of course, I am representing the same stuff under a different aspect if I represent it as water than if I represent it as H_2O. Strictly speaking, there is an indefinitely large number of different points of view, different aspects, and different conceptual systems under which anything can be represented. If that is right, and it surely is, then it will be impossible to get the coincidence between truth and reality after which so many traditional philosophers seem to hanker. Every representation has an aspectual shape. It represents its target under certain aspects and not others. In short, it is only from a point of view that we represent reality, but ontologically objective reality does not have a point of view.

8

Does the Real World Exist?

Part II: Could There Be a Proof of External Realism?

Realism as a Background Condition of Intelligibility

I have said that certain standard arguments against realism are invalid. Are there any arguments to be given in its favor? There is something puzzling about demanding an argument to show that the world exists independently of our representations of it. I realize that Kant thought it a scandal that there was no such proof, and Moore thought he could give proof just by holding up his two hands. But, one feels, in the way that Kant posed his demand nothing could have satisfied it, and Moore's attempt to satisfy it somehow "misses the point." Yet, at the same time, one feels that one ought to satisfy Kant's demand, and that at some level Moore was surely right. He certainly did have two hands, and if he had two hands then the external world exists. Right? What is going on?

We need to explain both our urge to prove external realism and our sense that any proof begs the question.

The demand for a proof of external realism is a bit like the demands one used to hear in the 1960s for a proof of rationality—"What is your argument for rationality?"—in that the very posing of the challenge somehow presupposes what is challenged. Any attempt to provide an "argument" or "proof" already presupposes standards of rationality, because the applicability of those standards is constitutive of something's being an argument or proof. In a word, you can't prove rationality by argument because arguments already presuppose rationality. There are a number of such general frameworks where the demand to justify the framework from within the framework is always senseless and yet somehow seems incumbent upon us. Thus, although one can prove that a particular argument is valid or rational within the criteria of rationality and validity, one cannot prove within those criteria that rationality is rational or that validity is valid. Similarly, one can establish that a given sequence of words is a grammatical or ungrammatical English sentence, but one cannot establish that English as a language is grammatical or ungrammatical, because English sets the standard for grammaticality in English. The effort to establish external realism by some sort of "argument" would be analogous to one of these efforts. It would be as if one tried to establish that representation represents. One can show that this or that claim corresponds or fails to correspond to how things really are in the "external world," but one cannot in that way show that the claim that there is an external world corresponds to how things are in the external world, because any question of corresponding or failing to correspond to the external world already presupposes the existence of an external world to which the claim corresponds or fails to correspond. External realism is thus not a thesis nor an hypothesis but the condition of having certain sorts of theses or hypotheses.

You can see that something is wrong with this entire debate if you look at standard contemporary arguments in favor of external realism. A standard argument, perhaps the standard argument,

for realism is that convergence in science provides a kind of empirical proof of realism. The idea is that because different scientific investigators working at different times and places come up with the same or similar results, the best explanation for their doing so is that there is an independently existing reality that causes them to converge on the same hypotheses and theories. The difficulty with this argument is that in our understanding of the possibility of there being such phenomena as either convergence or failure of convergence, we are already presupposing realism. In order for us even to raise the question whether scientific investigation does converge in the suggested fashion, we have to presuppose an independently existing reality of investigators engaging in investigations. These investigations either converge or fail to converge; that is, the entire discussion of convergence presupposes realism, because it presupposes that the statement "Science converges," whether true or false, concerns a reality independent of that or any other statement. Another way to put this point: In areas where science fails to converge, e.g., social psychology, our recognition of the failure provides exactly as much *evidence* for realism as our recognition of those areas in which it does converge, i.e., it provides no *evidence* at all, since in recognizing something as either convergence or nonconvergence, we are already taking realism for granted.

I realize that the convergence argument is often presented as an argument for the existence of unobservable entities postulated by scientific theories and not as a general argument for external realism. But then it is faced with a dilemma. If, on the one hand, the convergence argument is an argument to establish the existence of this or that type of unobservable entity, say, electrons, then the notion of convergence adds nothing whatever to the usual notions of evidence, verification, and truth. If the atomic theory that postulates electrons is confirmed in both my lab and yours, then that is further evidence that the theory is true, and if the theory entails that electrons exist, then we have good evidence that electrons exist. The notion of convergence adds nothing to this story. And the

fact that we may have a number of such stories about different types of unobservable entities still gives us nothing more than a list of cases of scientific confirmation and disconfirmation. But if, on the other hand, the convergence argument is to be a genuine metatheory about the sociology of scientific research, a theory to the effect that, as a matter of second-order empirical fact, scientists working at different times and places tend to produce convergent results, results that agree from one lab to another, and that this convergence is confirming evidence for realism, then it is subject to the objection I made earlier: In order that we can even consider the problem of convergence we have to presuppose realism.

To explore this point further I want to ask, what is wrong with Moore's "proof"? Moore thought that by proving the existence of two or more things such as hands, sheets of paper, shoes, socks, etc., he would have proven the existence of "things outside of us" and ipso facto would have proven the existence of an "External World," because, as he says, "it will follow at once that there are some things to be met with in space."* On this view the relation between his premise and conclusion is a straight entailment relation: The proposition that I have two hands entails the proposition that the external world exists. The existence of the external world is a truth condition of the proposition that I have two hands in the same way that the existence of at least one hand is a truth condition of that proposition. If I have two hands then it follows immediately that "there are things to be met with in space." And he establishes the "premise" by demonstration. He simply makes a certain gesture and thereby "proves" the existence of his hands. But there is something fishy about this. Berkeley, for example, would have agreed that Moore had two hands but would have challenged the alleged entailment, so it looks as if Moore is "begging the question." Isn't the entailment precisely what is at issue?

I suggest that there are at least two worrisome features of Moore's proof: The first is the assumption that ER is a truth condition like any other, and the second is the related assumption that realism is a theory about external "objects" in "space." Against these views, the claims I want to make are: First, though there is no sharp dividing line between the two, we need to make a general distinction between truth conditions and conditions on intelligibility. There are conditions on the intelligibility of discourse, and indeed on the functioning of intentionality in general, that are not like paradigmatic cases of truth conditions. In the normal understanding of discourse we take these conditions for granted; and unless we took them for granted, we could not understand utterances the way we do or even have the intentional states with conditions of satisfaction that we have. In earlier writings I divided some of these conditions into a Network of beliefs and other intentional states, on the one hand, and a Background of abilities, capacities, etc., on the other. The claim I make here is that ER

*The crucial passage is this:

> That is to say, if I can prove that there exist now both a sheet of paper and a human hand, I shall have proved that there are now 'things outside of us'; if I can prove that there exist now both a shoe and sock, I shall have proved that there are now 'things outside of us'; etc.; and similarly I shall have proved it, if I can prove that there exist now two sheets of paper, or two human hands, or two shoes, or two socks, etc. Obviously, then, there are thousands of different things such that, if, at any time, I can prove any one of them, I shall have proved the existence of things outside of us. Cannot I prove any of these things?
>
> It seems to me that, so far from its being true, as Kant declares to be his opinion, that there is only one possible proof of the existence of things outside of us, namely the one which he has given, I can now give a large number of different proofs, each of which is a perfectly rigorous proof; and that at many other times I have been in a position to give many others. I can prove now, for instance, that two human hands exist. How? By holding up my two hands, and saying, as I make a certain gesture with the right hand, 'here is one hand', and adding, as I make a certain gesture with the left, 'and here is another'. And if, by doing this, I have proved *ipso facto* the existence of external things, you will all see that I can also do it now in numbers of other ways: there is no need to multiply examples.
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> G. E. Moore, Philosophical Papers, "Proof of an External World" (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1959), pp. 145–46.

functions as a taken-for-granted part of the Background. Unless we take ER for granted, we cannot understand utterances the way we normally do. Furthermore we have to take ER for granted to engage in the sorts of discourse and thought that we have been engaging in. The presupposition of ER is thus a *necessary* presupposition for a large chunk of thought and language. We can't give it up as, for example, centuries ago we gave up our presupposition that the earth is flat.

And the second response I want to make to Moore is that once we see that ER so construed is not an empirical thesis but rather a condition of intelligibility on having certain sorts of theses, then we can see that it has no special connection to the theory that there are "objects" in "space." As I said at the beginning of Chapter 7, even if it should turn out that our notions of "objects" and "space" have to be radically revised, as in fact they have been revised by atomic theory and relativity theory, all the same, ER remains untouched. Carefully stated, external realism is the thesis that there is a way that things are that is independent of all representations of how things are.

The thesis that there is a reality independent of our representations identifies not how things are in fact, but rather identifies *a space of possibilities.* Using a Wittgensteinian style of example, we can think of it this way. Suppose I say, "I have no money at all in my wallet." Now that utterance does not logically imply the existence of money. You cannot infer from

$$\sim(\exists x)\ (\text{money } x\ \&\ \text{in my wallet } x)$$

(It is not the case that there is some x such that x is money and x is in my wallet.)

to

$$(\exists x)\ (\text{money } x)$$

(There is some x such that x is money.)

But all the same the original utterance only makes the kind of sense it does, we only understand it the way we do, against the presupposition of the existence of money. It has its sense against a space of possibilities of having money. In that sense, External Realism articulates a space of possibilities for a very large number of statements.

A "Transcendental" Argument for External Realism.

If these suggestions—that ER is a Background presupposition and not an empirical theory, and that it is purely formal without any specific content about, for example, objects in space—are right, the only argument we could give for ER would be a "transcendental" argument in one of Kant's many senses of that term: We assume that a certain condition holds, and then try to show the presuppositions of that condition.

In order to do this, however, we have to make precise what the view is that we are arguing against. Antirealism is not a single doctrine but comes in different versions. For this discussion, the two most important are, first, the view that all reality consists in conscious states, and, second, the view that reality is socially constructed, that what we think of as "the real world" is just a bunch of things constructed by groups of people. To have labels, let us call the first view "phenomenalist idealism," and the second "social constructionism."

There is a simple transcendental argument against phenomenalist idealism. I said that a transcendental argument is one that assumes a certain condition obtains and then tries to show the presuppositions of that condition. In this case, however, the "condition" has to do with our practices and the "presupposition" is what we, from our own first-person point of view, must presuppose when we engage in those practices. The condition is that we do in fact attempt to communicate with each other by making certain sorts of utterances in a public language and the presupposi-

tion is external realism. To spell this out a little bit more precisely: the assumption we are making is that there is a normal way of understanding utterances, and that when performing speech acts in a public language, speakers typically attempt to achieve normal understanding. The point we are attempting to show is that for a large class (to be specified further) a condition of intelligibility for the normal understanding of these utterances is that there is a way that things are that is independent of human representations. The consequence is that *when we attempt to communicate to achieve normal understanding with these sorts of utterances we must presuppose external realism.*

Notice that we are not trying to prove the truth of external realism. I do not believe there could be a non-question-begging argument for ER. But we can show that when we engage in certain sorts of talk we presuppose external realism.

To develop the argument I need to explain the notion of "normal understanding." For most speech acts there is a commonsense or normal understanding. Often this is given by disquotation; for example, the normal understanding of the utterance "I have two hands" is that it asserts that the speaker has two hands. But wherever there is disquotation there must always be further ways of describing normal understanding. Thus in the normal understanding of "I have two hands," for example, there must be a possible description of what a hand is.

If you follow out the line of describing normal understanding, you soon reach conditions that are not truth conditions, at least not as usually construed. To see this, ask yourself what sorts of things we automatically take for granted when we understand Moore's claim, "I have two hands." As we saw in Chapter 6, there are lots of features of the Background that are not explicit in the semantic content of the sentence but that we automatically take for granted. For example, we take it for granted that Moore's hands stand in a certain relation to the rest of his body. We would understand the sentence quite differently if we understood it on

analogy with the following: "I have two diamond necklaces and I keep them both in a bank vault in Switzerland and I have two hands and I keep them in the same bank vault."

But where in the sentence does it say or imply that Moore's hands are not to be kept in a bank vault or even that they are attached to his body? This is one of the things that we simply take for granted. There is no limit to the number of such Background and Network presuppositions that we have to make in order to understand even such a simple utterance as Moore's. Thus, for example, suppose that we took it for granted that if Moore has two hands, they are attached to his body all right, but they are growing out of his left ear. Or perhaps that they are attached to his arms, but his body has shrunk to the size of a grain of sand, and his two hands have grown to be each as big as the Atlantic Ocean. Again, suppose we assumed that if people have hands, they flash in and out of existence like an intermittent flashlight beam. With such crazy alterations in the Background, we would understand the sentence quite differently from the way we currently understand it. The point is that in our normal understanding we take a great deal for granted, but many of these conditions on our normal understanding cannot be thought of as truth conditions on the utterance without considerable distortion. These are the sorts of conditions that help us to *fix* the truth conditions of our utterances. They are not themselves part of those truth conditions.

The claim I now want to substantiate is, External Realism is a Background presupposition on the normal understanding of a very large class of utterances. But it differs from many other Background presuppositions in that it is both pervasive and essential. It is pervasive in the sense that it applies to a very large class of utterances; it is essential in the sense that we cannot preserve normal understanding of these utterances without it. To see that it is pervasive, notice that it applies to a large range of quite different kinds of utterances such as

Mt. Everest has snow and ice near the summit.
My dog has fleas.
Hydrogen atoms each contain one electron.

To show that it is *essential* we need to remind ourselves that the sentences in question, as sentences of a *public* language, are assumed to be understood in the *same* way by any competent speaker and hearer. Normal understanding requires sameness of understanding by both speaker and hearer, and sameness of understanding in these cases requires that utterances of the referring expressions purport to make reference to a *publicly* accessible reality, to a reality that is ontologically objective. But the condition on public accessibility to the sorts of phenomena in these examples is that the way that things are does not depend on your or my representations. You and I can both understand the utterances above—about Mt. Everest, my dog, and hydrogen atoms—in the same way, because we take it for granted that the utterances are about a publicly accessible reality. And this point holds even if the particular references fail because of the nonexistence of the entities we are trying to refer to. Even if turns out that Mt. Everest and hydrogen atoms had never existed, and I never had a dog, all the same, we still understand the utterances as depending for their normal intelligibility on the existence of an external reality. We almost want to say, "Even if no Mt. Everest, no hydrogen atoms and no Searle dog, all the same *External Reality would still be such that:* no Everest, no hydrogen atoms and no dog." But that is the wrong way to say it, because it makes it look as if each utterance contains a concealed reference to some special entity called "External Reality" with capital E and R; and that is precisely what we do not want to say. What we should say, rather, is this: A public language presupposes a public world in the sense that many (not all) utterances of a public language purport to make references to phenomena that are ontologically objective, and they ascribe such and such features to these phenomena. Now, in order that we should understand these utterances as having these truth conditions—the existence of these phenomena and the possession of these features—we have to take for granted that there is a way that the world is that is independent of our representations. But that requirement is precisely the requirement of external realism. And the consequence of this point for the present discussion is that efforts to communicate in a public language require that we presuppose a public world. And the sense of "public" in question requires that the public reality exists independently of *representations* of that reality.

The point is *not* that in understanding the utterance we have to presuppose the existence of specific objects of reference, such as Mt. Everest, hydrogen atoms, or dogs. No, the conditions of intelligibility are still preserved even if it should turn out that none of these ever existed. The existence of Mt. Everest is one of the truth conditions of the statement; but the existence of a way that things are in the world independently of our representations of them is not a truth condition but rather a condition of the form of intelligibility that such statements have.

The point is not epistemic. It is about conditions of intelligibility and not conditions of knowledge, because the point applies whether or not our statements are known or unknown, and whether they are true or false, and even whether the objects purportedly referred to exist or not. The point is simply that when we understand an utterance of the sorts we have been considering, we understand it as presupposing a publicly accessible reality.

There is another way to work up to the same conclusion. Any truth claim presupposes that there is a way that things are regarding the content of that claim. And this point holds as much for mathematical statements such as

$$2 + 2 = 4$$

or for statements about personal experiences such as

as it does for statements about mountains, dogs, and electrons. What is special about these latter sorts of statements is that they purport to make reference to publicly accessible phenomena, in these examples, publicly accessible physical objects. But for such cases we presuppose not only that there is a way that things are that is independent of our representations, but that *there is a way that things are in a publicly accessible, i.e., ontologically objective, realm.* But the presupposition of a mind-independent reality already contains the presupposition of a representation-independent reality, and that presupposition just is external realism. ER, so construed, is a purely formal constraint. It does not say how things are but only that there is a way that they are that is independent of our representations. The argument so far can be summarized in a series of steps:

1. The normal understanding of utterances in a public language requires that the utterances be understandable in *the same way* by any competent speaker and hearer of the language.

2. A large class of utterances purport to make reference to phenomena that exist outside of, and independently of, the speaker, the hearer, and their representations, and indeed, in some cases, independently of all representations.

3. Features 1 and 2 require that we understand the utterances of many of these sentences as having truth conditions that are independent of our representations. By purporting to make reference to *public phenomena,* phenomena that are ontologically and not merely epistemically objective, we presuppose that the truth or falsity of the statements is fixed by how the world is, independently of how we represent it.

4. But that presupposition amounts to the claim that there is a way things are that is independent of our representations, and that claim is just (one version of) external realism.

One last way—and perhaps the simplest way—to see this point is to use Brute Force: Put an explicit statement of the denial of the

Background conditions into the speech act itself and see what happens. See, for example, how it contrasts with the denial of standard truth conditions.

If I say:

Mt. Everest has snow and ice near the summit and there is no snow on Mt. Everest.

what I have said is self-contradictory, because the first clause entails the negation of the second. But if I say:

> Mt. Everest has snow and ice near the summit, and external reality has never existed.

what I say is literally puzzling. We do not know how to understand it in the normal way, because the second clause doesn't just contradict the first clause but denies a condition that is taken for granted in the normal understanding of the first.

Berkeley and other idealists recognized something very much like this point. Berkeley saw that it was a problem for his account that if each person refers only to his or her own ideas when speaking, then there is a question about how one succeeds in communicating with others. Berkeley's answer was that God guarantees successful communication. This, I believe both Berkeley and I would agree, is not a case of normal understanding in my sense. When I say "snow is white" or "my dog has fleas," I am not normally taken to be relying on God, since even an atheist can attempt to communicate in a public language. Berkeley saw that the price for abandoning external realism was an abandonment of normal understanding, and he was willing to pay the price. One objection to some of the current challenges to realism is that they want to abandon external realism without paying the price. The price of the abandonment of realism is the abandonment of normal understanding. If someone wishes to abandon normal understanding, he or she owes us an account of what sort of understanding is possible.

The Distinction Between Brute Reality and Socially Constructed Reality

My argument is not yet complete. The argument so far, if valid, is an answer to phenomenalist idealism but not to social constructionism. What it shows so far is that for a large class of utterances, *each* individual utterance requires for its intelligibility a publicly accessible reality. I have further characterized that reality as representation independent. But there is still an ambiguity. Talk of money and marriages is talk of a publicly accessible reality, and such phenomena are "representation independent" in the sense that this twenty dollar bill or this marriage between Sam and Sally exists independently of your or my representations of it. After all, statements about money meet the conditions that there are facts independent of the speech act that makes them satisfied or unsatisfied, e.g., "You owe me five dollars" presupposes an independently existing reality as much as does "Mt. Everest has snow and ice near the summit." But marriages and money, unlike mountains and atoms, do not exist independently of *all* representations, and this distinction needs to be made explicit in the account. The argument so far might be interpreted to allow that all of reality is socially constructed in the way that, for example, money is socially constructed. Facts about money can be epistemically objective even if the existence of money is socially constructed, and, therefore, to that extent, ontologically subjective.

To complete the argument we need to show that within the class of speech acts that refer to a reality beyond themselves there is a subclass whose normal understanding requires a reality independent of *all* representation. The simplest way to show that is to show that a socially constructed reality presupposes a reality independent of all social constructions, because there has to be something for the construction to be constructed out of. To construct money, property, and language, for example, there have to be the raw materials of bits of metal, paper, land, sounds, and marks, for example. And the raw materials cannot in turn be socially constructed without presupposing some even rawer materials out of which they are constructed, until eventually we reach a bedrock of brute physical phenomena independent of all representations. The ontological subjectivity of the socially constructed reality requires an ontologically objective reality out of which it is constructed. To the "transcendental argument" of the previous section—a public language presupposes a public world—we add a "transcendental argument" in this section—a socially constructed reality presupposes a nonsocially constructed reality.

By this stage in the argument I hope the point is obvious. In a sense, one of the main aims of this book has been to spell it out. Because the logical form of the creation of socially constructed reality consists in iterations of the structure X counts as Y in C, the iterations must bottom out in an X element that is not itself an institutional construction. Otherwise you would get infinite regress or circularity. It is a logical consequence of the main argument of the book that you cannot have institutional facts without brute facts.

To conclude the discussion of realism I would like also to show that there is a contrast between the conditions on our normal understanding of statements about brute physical facts and those about institutional facts. To show that there is a class of speech acts that presuppose for their intelligibility a reality beyond *all* representations, let us once again use "Brute Force" and observe the consequences of putting the counterfactual supposition of the denial of the condition into the representation itself. Consider, e.g., the claims

1. Mt. Everest has snow and ice near its summit,

and its negation,

2. It is not the case that Mt. Everest has snow and ice near its summit.

Speech acts of the sort exemplified by claims 1 and 2, so I will argue, purport to state facts that are "ontologically objective" and

therefore "representation-independent" in the sense that I have tried to explain. In this respect they differ from, e.g., the claim

3. You owe me five dollars,

and its negation,

4. It is not the case that you owe me five dollars.

We can see the difference if we put the counterfactual supposition into the claims, as follows:

A. In a world that is like ours, except that representations have never existed in it, Mt. Everest has snow and ice near the summit,

and

B. In a world that is like ours, except that representations have never existed in it, it is not the case that Mt. Everest has snow and ice near the summit.

Notice that in A and B, on our normal, naive, intuitive understanding, the supposition of the antecedent does not affect our understanding of the whole statement, as is shown by the fact that the negation of the consequent leaves the status of this type of statement unaffected. The truth or falsity of both A and B depends entirely on the presence or absence of snow and ice near the summit of Mt. Everest, and the presence of snow and ice near the summit of Mt. Everest is in no way dependent on the existence of human or other sorts of representations.

But contrast these cases with

C. In a world that is like ours, except that representations have never existed in it, you owe me five dollars,

and

D. In a world that is like ours, except that representations have never existed in it, it is not the case that you owe me five dollars.

There is a crucial difference between A and B, on the one hand, and C and D, on the other. On our normal understanding, A and B are unaffected by the counterfactual supposition; our understanding is the same and their truth depends entirely on the existence of snow and ice at the summit of Mt Everest. But C, as it stands, is puzzling and even self-defeating in the same way that "There is snow on Mt. Everest and the external world has never existed" is self-defeating, for a condition of the possibility of your owing me money is the existence of certain human rules, practices, and institutions. And this is shown by the fact that if we negate the consequent in C so that we get D, if we could understand the result at all we would have to understand it as a trivial truth: There is no way that anyone could owe anyone anything in a world without representations. To say that you owe me money in a world in which no one ever said or thought anything would be like saying you got a base hit to left center field in the third game of the World Series in a world in which baseball never existed.

To summarize, the claim that I am making is this: Any statement is a representation and therefore to be understood as a statement must be understood as a representation. Statements 1, 2, 3, and 4 all share this feature. But there is a difference between statements 1 and 2, on the one hand, and 3 and 4 on the other. 1 and 2 purport to represent mind-independent features of the world and therefore do not require the existence of representations in the world as part of the conditions of their normal intelligibility. Statements 3 and 4, on the other hand, purport to be about representation-dependent features of the world and therefore do require the existence of representations as part of the conditions of their normal intelligibility. You can see this by considering the normal understanding of sentences where 1, 2, 3, and 4 are embedded in sentences expressing a counterfactual supposition of the nonexistence of any representations, A, B, C, and D. On our normal understanding, the truth value of 1 and 2 is unaffected; the truth value of 3 and 4 is affected decisively. On the supposition, 3 becomes self-defeating, almost self-contradictory; 4, if

intelligible at all, becomes trivially true. Thus, on our normal understanding, statements about money require the existence of representations as part of their conditions of normal intelligibility. Statements about mountains are entirely free of any such requirement.

The upshot then is that there is a contrast between the role of the presupposition of external realism and the presupposition of the existence of human representations in normal understanding. Normal understanding of talk of both money and mountains requires external realism, but normal understanding of talk of money presupposes the existence of representations in a way that normal understanding of mountains does not. Money is understood as socially constructed; mountains are not understood as socially constructed.

Strengths and Limitations of the Foregoing Arguments

This aim of this chapter has been to show that our ordinary linguistic practices presuppose external realism, just as the aim of Chapter 7 was to show that certain arguments against that presupposition do not work. Now I want to say what is and what is not proved by the "transcendental arguments" in this part.

1. I have not demonstrated that external realism is true. I have tried to show that it is presupposed by the use of very large sections of a public language. If you take yourself to be communicating with others in the normal way in the sort of speech acts I have given as examples, you are committed to external realism. I have not shown that there is a real world but only that you are committed to its existence when you talk to me or to anyone else.

2. An alternative is always solipsism, the view that my mental states are the only things that exist. I have not refuted solipsism; that is, I have not refuted solipsism for me. Only remember: Your

solipsism is instantly refuted by me; mine—assuming that you exist—instantly refuted by you.

3. I have not shown that we all have a belief or are committed to a belief in realism. On the contrary, realism is part of the Background; and when functioning the Background is not a matter of any intentional states at all. One of the keys to understanding the Background is this: One can be committed to the truth of a proposition without having any beliefs, thoughts, assumptions, hypotheses, or other "propositional attitudes" regarding that proposition at all. "Taking something for granted" need not name a psychological state. Pretheoretically we take external realism for granted, and for that reason it need not be a belief, but is prior to having beliefs.

4. There is nothing epistemic about the arguments. I am not saying that in order to *know the truth* of our claims we have to presuppose realism. My argument is completely independent of questions of knowledge or even of truth. On my account, falsehood stands as much in need of the real world as does truth. The claim, to repeat, is about conditions of *intelligibility*, not about conditions of *knowledge*.[1]

5. The arguments only apply to utterances for which there is a normal understanding. Famously, there is no normal understanding of quantum mechanics or the set theoretical paradoxes. The struggles over the interpretation of quantum mechanics are, at least in part, an attempt to provide a normal understanding of these claims. Not every proposition about the world has a normal understanding.

6. There is nothing self-guaranteeing about normal understanding. Sometimes we are forced to revise our normal understanding because of new discoveries. This happened in the case of color statements. Pretheoretically we think of colors as intrinsic

features of objects; but physics tells us that as far as color is concerned, the only intrinsic feature of an object is that it differentially scatters and absorbs the various wavelengths of light. These light/matter interactions are detected by our nervous system, producing the experiences that we interpret as color. In such a case, we replace one normal understanding with another. But notice that the replacement (and presumably correct) normal understanding presupposes ER as much as did the earlier (presumably mistaken) normal understanding. To put this point very crudely: the discovery that colors as such are not a part of the external world does not threaten our presupposition of the existence of the external world, because we still rely on the external world to give our backup account of the subjective illusion of color. Similar remarks could be made about, for example, solidity. The prospects of refuting ER by appealing to the history of science would appear to be doomed to failure, because the history is one of replacing a mistaken normal understanding, where an apparently ontologically objective phenomenon is shown to be really subjective, with an account given in terms of phenomena that supposedly really are objective.

7. If my argument is correct, it should go part of the way toward explaining our embarrassment in the face of demands to prove the existence of the real world, and the inadequacy of existing proofs. I think it does this. Once we start talking to our interlocutors we have already presupposed the existence of the real world, and we are embarrassed to try to prove what our attempts at proof already presuppose.

I conclude this chapter by answering the following question: Why does it matter? What difference does it make? After all, as Wittgenstein says somewhere, it is possible to construe these great debates between realism and antirealism, between idealism and materialism as just so many battle cries. The antirealist nonetheless takes his car to a mechanic to get it fixed and brushes his teeth, just as if he believed they were objects in the external world.

So what difference does it make whether or not one says that one is a realist or an antirealist?

I actually think that philosophical theories make a tremendous difference to every aspect of our lives. In my observation, the rejection of realism, the denial of ontological objectivity, is an essential component of the attacks on epistemic objectivity, rationality, truth, and intelligence in contemporary intellectual life. It is no accident that the various theories of language, literature, and even education that try to undermine the traditional conceptions of truth, epistemic objectivity, and rationality rely heavily on arguments against external realism. The first step in combating irrationalism—not the only step but the first step—is a refutation of the arguments against external realism and a defense of external realism as a presupposition of large areas of discourse.

University Press, 1969), and John R. Searle, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Chapter 6. Background Abilities and the Explanation of Social Phenomena

1. N. Chomsky, *Reflections on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1975).
2. J. A. Fodor, *The Language of Thought* (New York: Crowell, 1975).
3. For further discussion, see John R. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind,* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 1992), chap. 7.
4. John R. Searle, *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), and op. cit. supra.
5. Searle, *The Rediscovery of the Mind,* chap. 7.
6. The example, I believe, is originally due to Robyn Carston, "Implicature, Explicature and Truth-Theoretic Semantics," in S. Davis, ed., *Pragmatics: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 33–51.
7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), part II, sec. xi.
8. Ibid., part I, para. 201.
9. Ibid., Part I, para. 324ff and passim.
10. Daniel Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987).

Chapter 7. Does the Real World Exist?
Part I: Attacks on Realism

1. An example of a realist philosopher who rejects the correspondence theory is Peter Strawson. See his "Truth" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* supplementary volume 24 (1950).
2. H. Putnam, *Realism With a Human Face* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 23.

3. Quoted by N. Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 36.
4. H. R. Maturana, F. J. Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition, The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1980).
5. Terry Winograd, "Three Responses to Situation Theory," *Center for the Study of Language and Information,* Report No. CSLI-87-106, 1987, and Terry Winograd and Fernando Flores, *Understanding Computers and Cognition* (Norewood, N.J.: Ablex, 1986), chap. 5.
6. G. Levine, "Looking for the Real: Epistemology in Science and Culture," in G. Levine, ed., *Realism and Representation: Essays on the Problem of Realism in Relation to Science, Literature and Culture,* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), p. 13.
7. J. Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 136.
8. Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face,* p. 96ff. H. Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987), p. 18ff.
9. N. Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters,* p. 36.
10. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. xi. The phrase is repeated in *The Many Faces of Realism,* p. 1.
11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), part.1, para. 464 (my translation).
12. I apologize for the brevity of this discussion. I have discussed these same issues in greater detail in chap. 2 of *Intentionality.* For the best argument against the sense datum theory, see J. L. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).
13. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922).

Chapter 8. Does the Real World Exist?
Part II: Could There Be a Proof of External Realism?

1. Putnam, attacking realism, describes it as the view that "*Truth* is supposed to be *radically nonepistemic.*" *Meaning and the Moral*

Sciences, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p. 125. But realism is the claim that *reality* is radically nonepistemic. And if it should turn out that the concept of "truth" is not radically nonepistemic, then we should simply have to get another concept that was, for we need a nonepistemic term to describe the correspondence between our statements and the radically nonepistemic real world.

Chapter 9. Truth and Correspondence

1. I have to say "in general" because, for example, some statements are self-referential, e.g., "This sentence is in English."
2. It is related to, but not the same as, Tarski's Convention T. See Alfred Tarski, "Der Wahrheitsbegriff in den formalisierten Sprachen," *Studia Philosophica* (1935) 261–405; translated as "The Concept of Truth in Formalized Languages" in Alfred Tarski, *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956).
3. J. L. Austin, "Truth," and P. F. Strawson, "Truth," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 34 (1950). Reprinted in Pitcher, ed., *Truth* (Englewood Cliffs: N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1964).
4. Strawson, in Pitcher, *Truth,* p. 32.
5. Ibid., p. 40, italics in the original.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1922).
7. Strawson, in Pitcher, *Truth,* p. 38.
8. Op. cit., p. 41
9. "What is a fact? A fact is a thought that is true." Gottlob Frege, "The Thought," in. P. F. Strawson, ed., *Philosophical Logic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 35.
10. Strawson, in Pitcher, *Truth,* p. 38.
11. Such statements can no doubt be paraphrased in ways that do not mention facts, but that is beside the point. The point here is that they make sense in a way that attributing causal powers to statements does not.

12. For examples of these views, see F. P. Ramsey, "Facts and Propositions," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* supp. vol. 7 (1927), reprinted in Pitcher, ed., *Truth;* P. Horwich, *Truth* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), and W.V.O. Quine, *Pursuit of Truth,* rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).
13. For more on this distinction, see J. R. Searle, *Intentionality* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 13.
14. Here is the entire argument as stated by Davidson:

    > The principles are these: if a statement corresponds to the fact described by an expression of the form 'the fact that p', then it corresponds to the fact described by 'the fact that q' provided either (1) the sentences that replace 'p' and 'q' are logically equivalent, or (2) 'p' differs from 'q' only in that a singular term has been replaced by a coextensive singular term. The confirming argument is this. Let 's' abbreviate some true sentence. Then surely the statement that *s* corresponds to the fact that *s*. But we may substitute for the second '*s*' the logically equivalent '(the *x* such that *x* is identical with Diogenes and *s*) is identical with (the *x* such that *x* is identical with Diogenes)'. Applying the principle that we may substitute coextensive singular terms, we can substitute '*t*' for '*s*' in the last quoted sentence, provided '*t*' is true. Finally, reversing the first step we conclude that the statement that *s* corresponds to the fact that *t*, where '*s*' and '*t*' are any true sentences.

    Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p. 42.
15. There are a number of criticisms of the slingshot argument. I believe the one closest in spirit to mine is in J. Barwise and J. Perry, *Situations and Attitudes* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983).

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The Construction of Social Reality