

**A STUDY OF THE  
REALISTIC MOVEMENT IN  
CONTEMPORARY  
PHILOSOPHY**

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**MATTHEW THOMPSON MCCLURE**

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# A Study of the Realistic Movement in Contemporary Philosophy

*by*

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## A Study of the Realistic Movement in Contemporary Philosophy

### 1. THE ISSUE OF NEW REALISM.

The issue of new realism may be set forth by giving the simplest possible description of any situation in which a human being consciously takes part. Anything purporting to be a "naive" description is usually, on the face of it, open to suspicion, so highly sophisticated do such unsuspecting accounts often turn out to be. A description to be naive, means, among other things, a description which does not import into the situation described any elements which are not elements of the situation; and these elements must be such that any one may identify them and admit their presence.

We may take a situation in which a human being is playing a part, and for our present purpose term that situation behavior. So far as one's body is an active factor in a situation the term behavior is inclusive of all its actions. It includes internal, organic reactions, reflex and automatic movements, and all higher bodily functions. My body, moreover, is active within a situation which extends beyond the limits of my body. It directly encounters an environment with which it is in continuous contact and with which it is homogeneous. It receives stimulations from it and adjusts itself with appropriate reactions. Now at some point in the genesis of behavior there enters the element of consciousness, and at this point a distinction is to be made between behavior and *conscious* behavior. Just how much the term conscious behavior includes it is unnecessary at present to say. Surely the environment does influence my body and elicit responses without any advent of consciousness. The savage gulping down his food, may, like the dog barking at the moon, be acting without any element of consciousness being present at all. The environment may be sensed with or without the presence of consciousness. In the former case it *is there*; and re-acted to, often with a high degree of direction and control; in the latter case it is not only there, but is *known*. The environment *is*, it may be *reacted to*, and then in ad-

dition it may be *known*. When it is known I say that I am aware of it. Getting into appropriate and successful contact with the environment may be the significant thing, and the one in the interest of which knowledge has arisen. But then it is knowledge which has arisen, and the fact of conscious behavior, however generated, invites analysis.

We may take, therefore, any situation which, in the loosest possible sense, may be termed *conscious behavior*. Within that situation at least one distinction may be made, the validity of which every one, whatever his philosophical views may be, would it may be supposed, admit. There is *being conscious* and there is *something of which* one is conscious. This is at once the simplest and, at the same time, the widest possible generalization of any situation into which a human being enters consciously as a factor. What is going on in such a situation represents two elements. No matter what "being conscious" is, how or for what purpose it appears, some activity or process termed *being conscious* is present. And it is equally plain that being conscious is always of something; *something* whether ideas, or thoughts, or images, or facts, or things, or objects, in the interest of which consciousness is operating. The act of being conscious is always concerned with something other than itself. Being conscious, it is plain, is never just that; there is "content" of some sort, and which, in some sense, is; and which, it is equally plain, is, in some sense distinguished from and other than the act of being conscious. Conscious behavior yields the distinction of a "that" and a "what": there is the act or process termed "being conscious"; and there is, in the broadest and loosest possible meaning of the word, the "content" of which one is conscious. The content element is easy to identify. The process element may be more difficult to identify. It may be so exceedingly "transparent" that its existence is never suspected. It may be completely void of any internal differentiation. Yet upon reflective analysis, it is always found to be there. In calling the act of being conscious, or what is the same thing, "awareness," an element of conscious behavior, it is not meant to suggest anything so definite as a term. It may turn out to be, upon closer analysis, either a term or a relation. At present it is only intended to point out that a distinction exists, and that the element distinguished may be identified; but the identification does not yield, *prima facie*, any metaphysical information about the status or the nature of the element distinguished.

Awareness and content are therefore, the two component elements in all conscious behavior. Any analysis invariably yields such a

polarization, all so-called "cognitive" functions are expressed in terms of this distinction. There is knowing and something known; believing and something believed; asserting and something asserted; feeling and something felt, etc. It may be that in feeling this duality is at a minimum, that the "that" and the "what" are less distinguishable here than elsewhere. The distinction is the result of a direct empirical analysis of the concrete situation. The two elements are what we find to be there. So far naive description may go and no further.

Into this simple description we may introduce refinements, and then we have a philosophy. The cardinal problems of philosophy are set in terms of this simple and discoverable distinction. They represent attempts to mark off the limits of the two elements; to ascertain their respective natures, and to adjust the relations between them, or at least to inquire into the possibility of there being such relations.

Some of the essential problems may be briefly indicated. From consciousness as an activity, it is easy to slip over to an agent who acts; or, expressed in terms of knowledge, from knowing as a function to a "knower" who knows. And so we may speculate touching the existence of a self, or ego, or soul. Questions as to the nature of the process arise. It is a purely psychical process, or is it generated out of material conditions and itself material? Does it antedate its content and thus come to be regarded as possessing the greater significance? Is it a creative activity somehow productive of its content which, consequently, sustains to it the relation of product? Is it an *actus purus*, or does it deposit, as it were, some by-product of a nature singularly like its own? Being conscious is variously designated as perceiving, judging, remembering, feeling, willing, etc. Is the *act* the same for all, or is there some qualitative differentiation between an act of remembering and an act of willing? Is it possible to describe the differences in terms of content, thus leaving awareness as undifferentiated? Has consciousness any mechanism of its own? Philosophical speculation has been directed more, however, to the content element, using the term "content" to stand for the other element of our description. What is the nature and status of contents? Does the content element occur in the absence of the process element? Or when contents occur in the same context with consciousness, are they dependent upon consciousness for their being? Do they all possess the same degree of reality, that is, do all exist, or do some merely subsist? Are all physical, or are all psychical? If not, some may be



physical, and some psychical; and of those which are psychical some may and some may not be dependent upon the process for their being. The content does not itself possess any intrinsic mark which gives away its metaphysical nature. It *is* but does not in addition proclaim itself to be either physical or spiritual. This is a problem to be determined.

These various questions, seemingly haphazard, may be grouped around two considerations. Some of the questions have reference to the sort of *reality* which content and process possess, namely, whether they are physical or psychical. As such they give rise to metaphysical or ontological problems. Others have reference to the type of relation obtaining between process and content. As such they are properly termed logical or epistemological problems.

The new realism is not interested in the question, what is it to *be* a physical content? or what is it to *be* a psychical content? It is interested in determining whether contents are physical or psychical, and if they are distributed over the two realms, in assorting them with respect to their proper place. But even the question as to the proper realm to which contents belong is a secondary one with the new realist and one in regard to which there are various answers. The primary problem is, according to realism, an epistemological inquiry.

Epistemology, most simply put, is an inquiry into the relations holding between knowing and the something known. Does the act of knowing in any sense alter or in any way modify the content known? Is the content of *which* one is conscious determined by the process which is conscious of it? Just what is the type of connection between the two elements? Is the connection so intimate that the one cannot exist apart from the other? Is there merely invariable association or does one element really constitute the other? Such questions indicate the so called epistemological inquiry.

As to the type of connection mentioned there are two views. One is that the content known cannot exist apart from the knowing of it. The two elements are inseparable, and the latter is constituted by the former, has no existence independent of it. Relations obtaining between them are intrinsic, essential, *internal*. The opposite view is that the content, or some part of it at least, exists quite independent of whether it is connected with thinking, or even where it is so connected, the connection is only that of juxtaposition or togetherness or compresence. The one does not owe its existence to the other.

Relations obtaining between them are *external*. Knowing makes no difference to what is known.

Technically put, the issue of new realism resolves itself into the simple question of whether relations are *external* or *internal*. New realism maintains that, in so far as knowledge is concerned, relations are *external*. The various ways in which this doctrine is asserted, and the evidence supporting the assertion, it will be our task to determine.

The above discussion, it is to be hoped, serves to set forth the issue with which the neo-realistic movement is chiefly concerned. One of its main contributions, as subsequent exposition will show, is the attempt, at least on the part of the American realist, to say something concrete about the process element of conscious behavior. Traditional philosophy has rested on the assumption that the process is *psychical*, something mental. It has given little attention to this element, more than to assume it. The emphasis has been placed on the content element, breaking it up into states of consciousness, or sensations, or images, or things, or what not. There are many indications at present of more interest in the analysis of the psychical act, resulting in the attempt to isolate and investigate it. There are indications of a general reaction to the traditional conception of consciousness with its corresponding doctrine of "states" as psychical existences. Among these tendencies the neo-realistic movement is to be reckoned. It has in common with other tendencies of contemporary thought the general revolt against the pre-suppositions and unbridled career of idealism. It is one of the many present day movements all of which are directed against the excessive extension of idealistic assumptions, and all of which are alike in according greater value to naive and immediate experience. In addition to this common tenet, it has much peculiarly characteristic which entitles it to a place as a distinct current in contemporary thought.

## II. HISTORICAL SURVEY

The neo-realistic movement has arisen largely in reaction to the excesses of idealism. It not only attempts to refute idealism, but to supercede it, to state the fundamental problems of philosophy in such terms as to render meaningless many of its persistent problems.

Since contemporary realism is to be viewed as a counter movement to the various forms of idealism, an exposition obviously necessitates an account, even if very summary, of the trend of modern idealism. And this, it may be said, really means a statement of the develop-

ment of modern philosophy. Modern philosophy when viewed in its complete historical sweep, presents three essential features. In the first place, modern philosophy has accorded greater significance to the element of consciousness. Taking as its starting point the world of mental life, it has assumed consciousness as the primal fact. It has rested on the assumption that the immediate data of knowledge are psychical. It has traveled from the inner world to the world outside. That consciousness existed, that there was a world of inner mental existences, that ideas, or states of consciousness, or psychical entities of some sort were the immediate objects of knowledge was never questioned. From the world as "idea" it has moved to the world as "fact." The *immediacy of the psychical* has been the dominant conception which has reigned supreme throughout the course of modern philosophy.

In the second place, the content element has tended to be taken over more and more by the process element, to be absorbed by it, to be integrated into some sort of psychical tissue. There has been an unbroken progression in which more and more of the outside world has been relegated to the domain of the inner life. Things as external objects have receded step by step and in their withdrawal have given way to mental existences. The universe of content, however, has remained fairly constant. What the outer world has lost, the inner world has gained. The ego, from being a substance supporting states of consciousness, has, by a process of absorption, swelled to the absolute.

In the third place, the problems of modern philosophy are secondary to its controlling assumption. What significance they imply and what meaning they possess is an acquired significance and meaning growing out of the postulate of the immediacy of the psychical. The problems, therefore, are not direct, but derivative, not generated from an empirical analysis of concrete situations, but set in the reflected light of an hypothesis. So long as this hypothesis has endured, problems have been transmitted from age to age with various refinements and accessions, but always under its control. It is for this reason that the meaning of modern philosophy is to be read largely in its history.

Each of these three features deserves some elaboration.

Modern philosophy has been largely idealistic for the reason that it has taken its start with the mental and rested on the common postulate that the immediate objects of knowledge are psychical. Such