

Epistemology beats Ontology

I. How values shape facts

At the level of everyday physical objects we make a distinction between knowledge and existence: whether we know something is there (or not, or is how it is) is quite a different matter as to whether it is in fact so. This is a natural, useful, unproblematic and necessary distinction. The following reflections are intended to demonstrate how this distinction sometimes breaks down when it is applied to other areas. Once we understand how the distinction ceases to apply, we are able to be unfazed by the controversy about free will. We shall also grasp how reality is always, to a degree, a matter of how we engage with reality, rather than seeing ourselves as passive observers.

Generally, we reflect about hidden reality and realities because we assume they will impinge on our lives in some way, and knowledge is believed to be a precondition of acting in our own best interests. One might say that, to this extent, we make a value judgement when we consider reality.

To communicate about reality in any precise way we are reliant on language; in the first place on the language of words and grammar, but also, for more sophisticated purposes, on the language of mathematics. In particular, we are reliant on that part of language which is used for descriptions.

(Early the last century, a lot of effort was expended by philosophers and logicians on how language might be descriptive, and slowly a great deal of progress was made. It is frustrating for those well versed in these subjects to observe other disciplines circuitously re-inventing the wheel.)

Let us take an everyday example of a descriptive exercise which is superbly manageable and transparent. Think of a map, for example, of a town.

One immediately envisages it showing the main and minor roads, possibly with names, and major monuments or geographical features such as rivers or hills. But a moment's reflection tells us that one could draw very different maps, for example of the sewage system, the momentary distribution of people, or the density of the cat and mouse population. It is a matter of what we are interested in.

What we are interested in is a matter of what we place value on (at a particular time, or with a certain purpose in mind, this purpose itself being a matter of what else we place value on). Hence we find values impinging on what seemed to be a purely descriptive exercise.

It might be thought that we could overcome this value bias by producing a map that was more detailed, so as to depict everything, including the cats and the sewage system, plus the bus routes and the cycle lanes. Obviously, though, there is no end to what we could include, and as soon as we choose to exclude something, we will have made a value

judgement about its significance. (If we were to exclude nothing, the map would be the town, in its entirety, and would hence be a copy of the town, rather than a map or even a model.)

Thus any shared engagement about reality, even at a very mundane level, involves facts and values commingling.

We tend to think of our values as something we have control over, whereas of reality as something we have very little control over. But many of our values are embedded in who we are. If we were ants, we would value things differently.

The point is that we can only bite off (i.e. ingest and digest) a small part of reality; and that knowledge always involves exploration, i.e. seeking to know (i.e. know more precisely). It is almost erotic.

Hence the idea that science or mankind could, in principle, obtain an overview of reality is quite misplaced. We are less godlike than we imagined.

We have, rather, glimpses of reality. This is meanwhile a commonplace, not only in mystic poetry, but superbly in physics, where Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle states that, at a certain level, we can know one thing or another, but never both. This insight applies equally well to the very human world of our social interactions. Once we demand to know, here & now and with penetrating precision, what a significant other thinks of us, we destroy

the relationship because our enquiry destroys what was to be known; the other will have changed their estimate of us, whether or not they had a precise estimate to begin with.

II. The whole is more than the sum of its parts

A driving principle of the scientific revolution has been the method of breaking problems down into their constituent parts, and then tackling each on its own. This approach has been breathtakingly successful. Some stubborn problems remain. It is assumed that these, too, can be similarly overcome, eventually. Why?

The assumption of those who do not ask why is that the whole cannot be more than the sum of its parts. These are people who hold that one should never think outside the box.

Some problems, surely, can only be tackled by taking the broader view. This said, the temptation then is to start thinking, in an undisciplined manner, in totalities. And therefore in abstractions.

III. Indeterminacy and freedom

Once knowledge is understood profoundly as being never a virtual reproduction of reality, but as an *ad hoc* partial mapping thereof, any disquiet about freedom of will is soon dispelled. Maybe, at some unfathomable level of reality, the future is indeed laid out and fixed irrevocably, as if in the mind of God, should this idea makes sense, rather than the appearance of sense. The disquiet some people feel when it is suggested that they may not have free will can be

addressed differently.

It is certainly the case that our subjective estimate of our freedom is often mistaken. We have more trouble than we'd like to think in liberating ourselves from (the adverse aspects of) our upbringing. Society may accord us, *de facto*, less room for manoeuvre than we imagine. The choices we face are less ample than envisaged. One never jumps entirely over one's shadow. But these reflections concern the greater scheme of things, not the minutiae.

At the micro-level we hear unsettling reports from neuroscientists of how a decision we imagine ourselves to take freely can be detected microseconds before it is made. These reports are taken from highly contrived scenarios, but they give pause for thought nonetheless. Until, at least, we appreciate that the ability of an external observer to predict when we will press a button (this is the kind of scenario that has been reported) is an instance of a fragment of knowledge that is isolated from wider knowledge, for example, knowledge about our plans for the coming hours or years. There is also the consideration that the homogenous (unrelenting) march of time may not apply at these levels, just as it fails to apply quite as we would have imagined at inter-galactic magnitudes.

Anyway, need we be so disturbed at the results of these experiments? Are they not trivial? The ability to predict with near certainty an event a second away is not in the same category as an imagined ability to predict reliably significant decisions hours or years away.

The thinking behind the neuroscience here is reductionist. By indicating that, over a minute (i.e. a tiny) time span, the sequence of cause and effect is reversed (the neurons seem to fire before the decision is made, rather than coming after the decision they are assumed to cause), an extrapolation is made that this will apply also on a grander scale too. This would mean that day-to-day human existence were the sum of its composite seconds, or milliseconds, and nothing more. The discomfort comes from the notion that an external observer, enabled by high-tech machines to map our brains, could predict our every move and even, by intervening, manipulate us. But the mapping is always necessarily incomplete, for the reasons explained above.

We can be manipulated, but by the means and at the levels we are fairly familiar with, and we know how to resist such manipulation. Similarly, it is sometimes possible for others to predict, in general terms, how we will behave, and we do not perceive this as being a threat to our freedom of will.