

Reality at Risk. By Roger Trigg. Sussex: Harvester Press; Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble. 1980.

“Physical objects cannot be thought of as existing apart from a thinking mind,” says the idealist, but does this mean: (a) physical objects cannot be thought-of-as-existing apart from a thinking mind, or (b) physical objects cannot be thought of as existing-apart-from-a-thinking-mind? Proposition (a) is undoubtedly true. One cannot think of anything without thinking. Yet, this does not mean that what one thinks about cannot exist without being thought of. There is a difference between the act of awareness and the object of awareness, and the idealist cannot win an easy victory over the realist by conflating proposition (a) with proposition (b).

Putting this distinction a little differently, the fact that a concept or word must be used to understand reality does not mean that what one understands are only concepts or words. To assume this is to commit the fallacy of confusing the use of a concept or word with the mention of a concept or word. Similarly, the fact that concepts or words are not the same as the reality they are used to know does not mean that one cannot know what things really are. Though human cognition must answer to the real in order to attain truth, this does not mean that the mode of cognition must be the same as what is known. Knowledge of reality does not require that the subject-object distinction be denied. Knowledge is *of* the real, but it is false to say that it *is* the real.

Finally, and most importantly, percepts and concepts are not, as much of modern philosophy has held, objects of direct awareness. They are not what we know. Rather, they are that by which we know.

Armed with these and other distinctions, Roger Trigg seeks to defend realism and do battle with idealism. Yet, Trigg is concerned with idealism only insofar as it is anthropocentric, that is, to the extent it regards reality as limited to what is real for men. He notes that “there is a fundamental divergence between those who wish to ‘construct’ reality out of men’s experiences, concepts, language or whatever, and those who start with the idea that what exists does so whether men conceive of it or not” (p. vii). Trigg finds this fundamental parting of the ways crucial to contemporary discussions of objectivity and seeks to show how realism is the necessary prerequisite for objectivity and how idealism (at least the anthropocentric kind) leads to relativism.

A primary example of the type of idealism that bothers Trigg is conceptual idealism. According to Trigg, this position does not deny the existence of a reality independent of minds, but it does deny that reality has any structure independent of minds. Concepts are used to carve reality into determinate sorts of things; but independent of the conceptual scheme in which this is done, there *are* no distinct things. A man, for example, can only be specified relative to a framework of identification. One cannot know what man really is independent of all frameworks and perspectives. Thus, the idea that our concepts might be validated or invalidated by reality is fruitless. “Reality” must mean reality-as-we-think-it; it cannot be understood in a mind-independent manner. Accordingly, theories are true as a result of intratheoretical coherence and not in virtue of reality. Now it should be realized that conceptual idealism involves

more than the trivial claim that we cannot step outside our mode of awareness. It involves the stronger claim that our concepts cannot describe the real. Our concept of man, to continue the example, cannot be taken as describing what he really is, because descriptions as such require the mind in order to exist. The classification "man" cannot be "read off" from the world but is itself a product of the mind. Thus, we cannot say what something really is.

Trigg objects that if conceptual idealism is true, then the status of mind-independent reality becomes suspect. If it is always inaccessible to us, then what entitles us to say that anything exists apart from our thought of it? Admittedly, a conceptual idealist such as Nicholas Rescher does not hold mind-independent reality to be a self-contradictory notion, but he does consider it "an essentially empty idealization . . . , something of which we know that we can know nothing of it in terms of our conceptual scheme" (quoted p. 9). So, Trigg asks: What point is achieved by referring to mind-independent reality? Why not apply Ockham's razor to such a superfluous entity? Trigg suspects that conceptual idealism's reluctance to adopt ontological idealism is due to the difficulties it would face in explaining such phenomena as scientific discovery and progress. *What* is being discovered and investigated? Why would scientists ever change their minds if there is nothing real apart from their thoughts? Trigg urges that conceptual idealism has no basis for speaking of mind-independent reality, and this makes it exceedingly difficult (if not impossible) to adequately account for what it is that scientists do.

Trigg also asks a very important question: Why is it assumed that our concepts are a barrier to reality? Why must they be regarded as blocking off the real? Why could they not be a means to reality? In other words, Trigg is accusing the conceptual idealist of a *non sequitur*. While it is most certainly true that we cannot describe or classify without a conceptual system or language, this in no way implies that our description or classification does not tell us what something really is. Our mode of cognition need not be the same as what we know. Trigg suggests that we should not allow the conceptual idealist to assume that our use of concepts precludes us from knowing reality as it is. Arguments that are often provided to support the claim that we cannot know what things really are lose much of their force when this simple, but important, point is made. Trigg illustrates this when considering Richard Rorty's claim that the notion of "the world" as used in such phrases as "different conceptual schemes carve up the world differently" is either determined by theory or unspecifiable. Trigg states:

It is a false choice. Different conceptual schemes may indeed carve up "the world" differently and "the world" is outside all such schemes, but this does not mean it is an inaccessible something of which we can know nothing. All the schemes do have access to it. Some may be more successful in capturing the nature of reality, but they cannot be seen in isolation from their attempts to describe it. Reality may be independent of all schemes, but they do not appear in a vacuum. They are produced by people who are trying to put into conceptual form the nature of reality, and the best scheme will come closest to showing reality as it is. There is then a middle course between conceptual idealism and the Kantian belief in things-in-themselves. [P. 120]

Indeed, there is a middle course, but this middle course depends on making clear that the mode of human cognition—for example, "man"—can still describe reality—for example, Rescher and Rorty—even though "man" does not exist as it were along side them as part of the world's furniture and cannot therefore be "read off" from the world.

Realism of the kind Trigg endorses, traditionally called “moderate realism,” considers knowledge to be more than merely a passive reflection of reality. Rather, human interests and needs play a role in the development of conceptual schemes. When confronted with the multifarious features of the world, we do tend to pick out those features that are relevant to our interests and needs; for example, the snow dweller’s account of snow as compared with the non-snow dweller’s reflects the former’s greater concern for the features of snow than the latter’s. This is not something that Trigg would deny. Yet, Trigg would insist that this does not prove that our mind, our concepts, or our language play an active role in molding reality. All that it shows is that human knowing “starts somewhere” and that we cannot claim to know everything in all its detail all at once. Thus, Trigg admits that there is a sense in which our knowledge is relative—namely, in the sense that we cannot be said to know *sub specie aeternitatis*—but this in no way requires that the real is either determined by theory or that our theory is barred from describing the real. As Trigg notes,

Our knowledge *is* still correct, since partial, or relative, knowledge is knowledge, and the mere use of the term ‘relative’ need not make us fear that we are lapsing into the kind of position which makes truth and reality themselves relative matters. ‘Relative’ is in fact being opposed to ‘absolute’ rather than ‘objective’.
[P. 196]

Human knowledge is achieved in pieces, step by step, and thus need not be regarded as a static, timeless snapshot or picture. Human knowledge can change and develop. Though Trigg’s realism requires that man is *not* the measure of all things, it allows man to be the *measurer* of all things. Our knowledge can thus be “objective” without having to be “absolute.”

Crucial to Trigg’s account of human knowledge is his view of truth. According to Trigg, truth can be seen from two perspectives, from that of someone trying to discover the truth and from that of someone trying to define the truth. Trigg defines truth as a correspondence with reality—“true theories are true *in virtue of* the nature of reality” (p. xiv). Yet, he takes no position on the exact nature of the correspondence required. Trigg does not seek to advance a unique set of all-purpose criteria by which truth can be determined in any area. He does not believe in some overall prescription for arriving at what is the case but instead holds that “the very natures of the objects of our interest should dictate different strategies to uncover them” (p. 199).

Admittedly, this position is metaphysical and general and is thus frustrating to those who want philosophy to be more concrete and deal with men’s actual epistemological problems. Trigg, however, claims that in one sense he is doing just that by allowing the procedures for discovering the truth to be determined by the subject matter of particular cognitive enterprises and not by some *a priori* methodology. In another sense, however, Trigg wants to take issue with those who would conclude that unless explicit criteria for discovering truth are forthcoming from its definition as a correspondence with reality, the entire concept is useless and should be discarded. Trigg regards the correspondence view of truth as analogous to a football player being told that the aim of the game is to score more goals than your opponent. Such instruction will not tell the player how he should run or pass the ball or even what plays to call. Yet, this instruction is of paramount importance; for without it the game has no purpose. Trying to discover truth without referring to an independent reality is like trying to play football without attempting to score goals. It leaves human

knowledge without a purpose, a series of clever gambits with no ultimate point.

It seems that Trigg's view of truth, as well as his stand regarding the realist/antirealist controversy, depends on the credibility of what he calls a "realist theory of meaning." Trigg does not, however, develop such a theory. Rather, noting that a realist theory of meaning is most complicated to devise, he offers the following intuitions about what such a theory should do: (1) Meaning has to be linked in some way to experience, but not as rigidly as verificationists hold. (2) Language has to be capable of being *about* something that is independent of it. (3) It must be possible to talk about something that is beyond our experience or refer to something that is very different from what we take it to be. (4) Most important, the basic realist insight—what is true is to be distinguished from what is recognized or agreed as true—must be preserved.

Trigg regards it as essential to avoiding anthropocentric idealism that theories of meaning not confine the meaning of a sentence to the conditions under which it is verified. If only verifiable sentences are meaningful, and if only meaningful sentences are capable of being either true or false, then truth is only what men can find out. Trigg considers the link between reality and man in verificationism to be as close as in any anthropocentric idealism. The crucial question, of course, is how *can* is interpreted. If, on the one hand, the process of verification is limited to what is at present humanly possible, then Trigg's concern has merit; for certainly the real is not necessarily confined to what man is currently capable of knowing. If, on the other hand, *can* is interpreted to mean what is *in principle* possible for man to verify—namely, what man *would* verify given appropriate conditions or circumstances—then Trigg's concern seems excessive. Indeed, Trigg himself notes that any realist would accept that there is a general connection between reality and what is recognizable in principle for man given that certain counterfactuals are fulfilled.

The point, of course, of all this is that there is tremendous ambiguity connected with any appeal to a principle of verifiability. Verificationists often argue for their principle by appealing to the highly weakened version but then operate with the stronger, but less plausible, version. Trigg is correct to note this ambiguity and to warn us of its dangers. Yet, it seems that Trigg himself gets caught up in this ambiguity. At times, he seems to hold that realism requires the acceptance of the proposition that there can exist things that are not only "incognizable" but are so forever as a matter of principle. At other times, he seems to hold that realism only requires the acceptance of the proposition that it is meaningful to speak of things that are "incognizable" and may indeed always be so, but not, however, as a matter of principle. Certainly, there is more to the world than we know, and it may just be that certain parts of reality will forever be beyond our grasp. Who can say? Realism requires that this be recognized. This is, however, different from the claim that there can exist something that we can never know in any way as a matter of principle. It is not necessary for a realist to claim this, nor is it intelligible. To make such a claim requires that we at least know why this something can never in any way be known. We must have a basis for making such a claim. Yet, if this is so, then we at least know something about this reality, and so it is not entirely unknowable.

Closely related to Trigg's analysis of the verificationist position is his consideration of whether developments in quantum mechanics require the abandonment of realism at the subatomic level. It seems to many physicists and

philosophers that it does. The reason for this is that it is impossible to make measurements of a subatomic physical system without disturbing it in some way. We cannot, for example, discover *both* the position and the momentum of a particle; the investigation of one precludes knowledge of the other. So, the question arises: How can we say a particle has both position and momentum if we cannot discover both? Trigg responds that the inability on our part to determine both the position and the momentum of a particle does not prove they are not real or that it is meaningless to refer to them. After all, a particle's position and momentum are not entirely inaccessible to us. We can know either. It is just that we cannot know both simultaneously.

There is, of course, the question whether our inability to know both the position and the momentum of a particle is due to some enforced ignorance or from some indeterminacy in things themselves. Yet, this question is not a problem for realism. In fact, the question arises from a realist perspective; for it distinguishes between restrictions on our knowledge of an entity's character and peculiarities in the character of an entity itself. Realism leaves either possibility open. If the distinction between our knowledge of an entity and the entity were collapsed, then this question would be pointless. The advantage of realism is that while it permits our knowledge to be of reality, it never forgets the subject-object distinction, and thus it "allows questions to be asked which would not otherwise be raised, and makes distinctions which would otherwise be ignored" (p. 169). Thus, while it is true that instruments causally affect what is being measured at the subatomic level, this does not imply that there is no distinction between the measurement and the thing measured. Some physicists have been too ready to equate reality with our knowledge of it.

Trigg is, however, quick to note that his insistence on an independent reality at the subatomic level does not mean that particles must behave like individual things at the macroscopic level or even that they *must* have definite quantities. The nature of reality at the subatomic level may indeed be far stranger than we can currently conceive. Realism does not try to adjudicate between physical theories. It seeks, rather, to aid the physicist in understanding what he is doing and his purpose in doing it.

Probably, the form of anthropocentric idealism that bothers Trigg the most is that found under the guise of sociology of knowledge. Though some versions of the sociology of knowledge are only concerned with investigating the processes by which a belief comes to be accepted as true, there are other versions that seek to explain what knowledge is. These latter versions turn to the psychologist or sociologist for an account of the nature of knowledge and thus seek to replace epistemology in its traditional role. In other words, some versions of the sociology of knowledge (usually the most interesting ones) seek to explain knowledge by reference to the historical, psychological, and social origins of our beliefs. They seek to show us the actual forces that make a belief true.

Trigg, of course, notes that such accounts of knowledge commit the "genetic fallacy"—the fallacy of confusing questions of origin with questions about validity and truth. There is a fundamental difference between what it is that makes someone believe something and what it is that makes a belief true, and this difference should not be ignored. Yet, advocates of such versions of the sociology of knowledge would reply that the origin and truth of a belief are indeed linked, and so there is no fallacy. But what does it mean to claim that the origin and truth of a belief are linked? Presumably, it means that if we can give a complete account of the myriad forces that lead to a belief being re-

garded as true, then we know the belief is true. This, however, will not do. As Trigg states,

How can we tell who is caused to believe what is true as opposed to what is false? How can we see who is in possession of knowledge and who has hit on the truth by accident? We must obviously have a prior understanding of what is true and of what constitutes good reasons for belief. [P. 148]

It seems that there must be a distinction between that which is "accepted belief" and that which is "correct belief"; otherwise there would on such accounts of knowledge be no falsehood or error. Such accounts could not show us the real forces that move us as contrasted to the apparent ones. Yet, if there is a difference between "accepted belief" and "correct belief," then there is a difference between that which makes us accept a belief and that which makes a belief true. Once this is accepted, however, the "genetic fallacy" returns. So an advocate of the sociology of knowledge who seeks to explain knowledge by reference to the origins of our beliefs is faced with a dilemma: *either* deny the distinction between "accepted belief" and "correct belief" and fail to differentiate between the real origins and apparent origins of our beliefs, *or* accept the distinction and be guilty of committing the "genetic fallacy." In order to avoid this difficulty, the sociologist of knowledge should concern himself with the processes that influence what passes for knowledge in society and not with knowledge.

Roger Trigg's *Reality at Risk* is a very good book. It should not only be read by philosophers; it should be read by anyone who is concerned with maintaining the notions of objectivity and truth. The major weakness of the book is that it does not involve itself in the necessary philosophical groundwork that its point of view demands. One wishes that Trigg would develop more fully the realist account of human cognition or at least refer to sources that do develop such accounts. Further, it is not always clear that the "realism" Trigg wishes to defend is the same thing in every instance. Greater analysis of what is being defended and criticized in various areas would have been helpful. The major strength of the book is that it is a comprehensive treatment of the realist/anti-realist controversy in a variety of disciplines. Though the major themes of the work have been presented, it has not been possible to discuss Trigg's illuminating and cogent treatment of Peirce, Wittgenstein, Davidson, and Quine. It is very helpful to have the theories of these thinkers discussed in light of the realist/antirealist controversy. It is also, however, depressing, for it is most evident that the notion of an independently existing reality is under attack. Trigg's book is an attempt to repel that attack, but it is also more. It is a warning.

It is a paradox that man can demand the centre stage, insisting that everything should depend on him, and yet in the end find that in doing so he has lost his rationality and his freedom. Realism takes the possibility of error and ignorance seriously, but it also gives men the chance of notable success in extending the range of their understanding. It gives them something to reason about, while acknowledging that they are free to make mistakes. [P. 197]

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