The Loss Of the Knowing Subject In Contemporary Epistemology

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There is something puzzling about demanding an argument to show that the world exists independently of our representations of it.
—John Searle[1]

I argue in this paper that the inability of contemporary American theories of knowledge to validate the central claim of realist epistemology—that some of our concepts refer to corresponding entities in the external world—is inextricably bound up with a failure to grasp the essential contribution of the knowing-self in the subject-object relation that constitutes knowledge. To be sure, much attention is given to the knower and to mental functions, as is clear from the literature on the philosophy of mind.[2] What I am saying is that too many epistemologists take too much for granted by failing to see that the knower contributes more to knowing than just forming beliefs, having memories and mental states, and imposing prejudices, feelings, and expectations on, or acting as a receptacle for, epistemological data.

This neglect results in a representationalist epistemology: the object of knowledge is not the extramental thing but *our concept of the thing.* This third thing between the knower and the known makes realism impossible to justify since, then, the object of knowledge is the concept within me, whereas realism, on the contrary, claims that assertions about the external world must have corresponding extramental entities. For if my representation of things constitutes a screen that blocks my direct knowledge of anything but the representation, then my assertions about the external world can refer only to *putative* external objects. That is why representationalists are inevitably prag-

[1] *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

[2] See, for example, Jerry Fodor, *The Elm and the Expert: Mentalese and Its Semantics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1994) and John R. Searle's two books, *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and *The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992).

matists.[3] For I have no alternative, when it comes to deciding whether my representations mirror external reality but to act on the premise that they do and see if I obtain the kind of results associated with the assumption that the representations have corresponding external entities.

Paradoxically, the movement from representationalism to pragmatism must finally rely on a coherentist criterion of truth that reduces "realism" to an epistemology indistinguishable from idealism. Consider: By what standard do we decide that any of our representations have corresponding external entities? The pragmatic criterion cannot be the final court of appeal since trying to justify the results of our actions as desirable or validating by appealing to the results of acting on the assumption that the previous results are valid only strings the question out and never gets to confronting the question of corresponding external entities. Besides, appealing to results to justify results can fall into the pit of circular reasoning. The answer must be an appeal to the coherentist criterion, which, as one of its advocates puts it, "has to be our ultimate criterion of truth."[4] An assertion is true if it is coherent with all the other assertions that comprise my universe of discourse. The pragmatist's assertion that a particular result is desirable or good or valid or true must ultimately find its validation in the coherence of that assertion with all the other assertions that compose his universe of discourse. But this is exactly what idealism holds, namely, that all we know are our ideas and ourselves. A strange realism that ends up indistinguishable from idealism! Despairing of breaking free of the immanentism of representationalism, some epistemologists, chiefly Quine,[5] propose that philosophy surrender epistemology to the field of psychology. Despite the objections that this proposal generated,[6] representationalism logically leads to the conclusion that epistemology is a branch of psychology because the latter is the discipline that studies intramental phenomena.

In contrast, the tradition of Aristotelian-Thomistic realism, which I shall defend in this paper, maintains that in order to know anything, I must enter into a subject-object relationship; for when I know, *I know something*. Know-

[3] Consider the dicta of a classic American representationalist: "Ideas become beliefs only when by precipitating tendencies to action, they persuade me that they are signs of things"; "Existence...not being included in any immediate datum, is a fact always open to doubt"; George Santayana, *Scepticism and Animal Faith* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), p. 16.

[4] Richard H. Schlagel, *Contextual Realism* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1986), p. 242.

[5] W. V. Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).

[6] See, for example, Jaegwon Kim, "What is 'Naturalized Epistemology'?," *Contemporary Readings in Epistemology*, ed. Michael F. Goodman and Robert A. Snyder (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993), pp. 323-35.

ing, then, has two components: an object that is known and a subject who knows. But it is a relationship in which, as I shall argue later, the knowing subject a) *becomes* the object, the thing known; and b) *dominates* and *possesses* the object. If either of these components were lacking, knowledge would be impossible. Ironically, the loss of the knowing subject is the price that is exacted for starting to philosophize within the knowing subject, a methodological blunder that ultimately originates in a refusal to accept the mind's immediate and certain knowledge of extramental things.

Brains and Vats

My first task in this section will be preliminary to explaining what I mean by saying that contemporary American epistemology has lost sight of the knowing subject and how that leads to representationalism and idealism. In unfolding this section, I refer to three authors, Richard Rorty, Hilary Putnam, and John Searle. I limit my critique of Rorty to the task of clarifying how I am using the word "representationalism" in this paper. My critique of Putnam and Searle attempts to show the link between representationalism and idealism. I am conscious of what might seem to be a glaring omission of authors more commonly identified with epistemology nowadays, such as Alvin I. Goldman, Kieth Lehrer, and Laurence Bonjour, to name just a few. My decision to omit them was made in the interests of simplicity and thus a hoped-for clear view of the problem. The fact is that the validation of our knowledge of the external world has either become a question so moot to mainstream epistemology as to warrant scant attention or become practically lost from sight by a jungle-growth of arguments on belief, justification, and warranted assertability,[7] not to mention formulas of escape from representational incarceration by remedies such as semantic externalism.[8] To make my argument, I have chosen Putnam and Searle for their direct and unencumbered approaches to the problem of our knowledge of the external world.

It might be supposed that the "brain in a vat" literature refutes my claim that today's epistemologists are either disinterested in, or guilty of obscur-

[7] "I have made no attempt to answer skeptical problems. My analysis gives no answer to the skeptic who asks that I start from the content of my own experience and then prove that I know there is a material world, a past, etc. I do not take this to be one of the jobs of giving truth conditions for 'S knows that p.'." Alvin I. Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing," *The Journal of Philosophy*, LXIV, 12 (1967), p. 372.

[8] See, for example, Anthony Brueckner, "Semantic Answers to Skepticism," *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Keith DeRose and Ted Warfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 43-60.

ing, the question of our knowledge of the external world. Admittedly, it cannot be charged with disinterest in the question. When presented in a theory of knowledge lecture, the brain in a vat example aims, we are told, "...to raise the classical problem of scepticism with respect to the external world in a modern way. (*How do you know you aren't in this predicament?*)"[9] But it skews the whole question by gratuitously going over to the idealist camp by embracing Descartes's premise that we are minds in a vacuum: a brain in a vat, no matter how ingenious its hook-ups with the external world, can hardly know in the same way the knowing subject of classical realism knows things. Classical realism operates on the premise of moderate dualism: the knowing subject is an integral composite of matter and spirit; in Aristotelian terms, it is a rational animal for whom all knowledge comes through the senses and for whom there is no sensation without intellection and no intellection without sensation. The brain in the vat proponents have surely kept their eye on the problem of how we know the external world, only they have traded the embodied knower of realism for the disembodied knower of Descartes.

Richard Rorty

Above, I described representationalism as the position that the concept is what we know rather than the thing to which the concept is supposed to refer. But that description needs parsing, at least in terms of its applications. For example, Richard Rorty calls himself an anti-representationalist, arguing that his pragmatism eliminates the need for intentional states of mind.[10] But there are, at least, three difficulties with his claim.

First, it is one thing for him to say that feelings are not intentional states, but quite another to say that beliefs and propositions and, indeed, perceptions of external reality do not result in representations. All these express themselves in mental states and concepts, so unless Rorty affirms the immaterial nature of mental states and concepts, which he does not,[11] then these mental states and concepts must *represent* the things of which they are the mental states and concepts.

Second, the denomination, "anti-representationalist," does not seem to square with his pragmatism. If a pragmatist is to avoid the charge of callousness or recklessness, he cannot, without giving pertinent reasons, offer "the

[9] Hilary Putnam, "Brains in a Vat," *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader*, p. 31.

[10] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 11, 371; *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth; Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 1-12.

[11] *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, chap. 1, esp. p. 20.

best results" as the primary justification for his pragmatism. Not only is there the problem, which I shall address below, of determining which results are "the best," there is also the problem of doing harm to individual human beings and institutions in the name of an overall smudgy criterion of the best result. On the contrary, the primary justification for pragmatism can only be representationalism: because it is impossible to know extramental things except as we represent them to ourselves and because we have no way of telling if our representations truly mirror the things that they are supposed to represent, our only recourse is to act on the premise that a given representation is true or good and see if it produces desirable results.

Third, Rorty looks very much the representationalist when he argues for "the priority of democracy to philosophy." The foundation of democracy must, he insists, be public consensus, which is possible only if the members of society are willing to compromise their most cherished principles.[12] This is so because he maintains that we cannot obtain objective knowledge of things (*pace*, the Enlightenment thinkers and their progeny, the Founding Fathers of democracy) for the simple reason that we are each trapped in our own ethnocentric prisons and can thus know things only from the standpoint of culturally conditioned perspectives. More recently he has identified himself with that group of philosophers who "...deny that the search for objective truth is a search for correspondence to reality and urge that it can be seen instead as a search for the widest possible intersubjective agreement."[13] Borrowing a phrase from Hilary Putnam, Rorty says that objective knowledge would require a "Gods-eye view" of things that we do not have.[14]

I may be rash to brand Rorty's doctrine of ethno-cultural relativism as an instance of full-blown representationalism without establishing whether he means that our ethnocentrism is incorrigible or simply a historically conditioned way of looking at the world that can be overcome by broader experience, reflection, and intellectual and moral discipline. My hesitation is increased because, thanks to John Searle's critique of antirealism (see below), I must now ask myself exactly how Rorty's ethno-cultural conditioning of our knowledge works. Does it distort things to such an extent that there is no way of telling if our representations of them are true or are these representations simply aspectual views of them, so that any distortion would result not from the representations themselves but from our interpretation of them?

[12] Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* , p. 190.

[13] "John Searle on Realism and Relativism," *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 63.

[14] "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," p. 202.

At all events, I think that my first two points show that no thinker who clings to a materialist conception of knowing—not even an avowed "anti-representationalist" like Richard Rorty—can escape the clutches of representationalism.

Hilary Putnam

Hilary Putnam is a semantical externalist[15], but he also advances an epistemology that he calls "internal realism."[16] By this term, he means that "...at bottom...realism is *not* incompatible with conceptual relativity. One can be *both* a realist *and* a conceptual relativist."[17] He chooses a lower case "r" for realism, despite the fact that it is part of the title of his theory, to emphasize his point that realism with a capital "R" bedevils commonsense realism. What we need is a theory that accommodates "the many faces of realism."[18] What Putnam hopes to accomplish with his theory is to overcome the dichotomies spawned by conflicting interpretations of experience, such as those between science and commonsense experience. For example, I put, what seem to me, pink ice cubes in my iced tea, but physics tells me that those objects in my glass that seem pink, solid, rectangular, cold, and hard are, in fact, simply groups of atoms and electrons and indeterminate mass particles whirling about devoid of solidity, shape, tactility and color. Which is the reality, the pink ice cubes or the submicroscopic particles? Putnam's answer is that it all depends on your conceptual scheme. If you are drinking iced tea, they are pink ice cubes; if you are doing submicroscopic physics, they are submicroscopic particles. This is the "conceptual relativism" to which he refers.

You might suppose that this dichotomy causes serious problems for realism. Putnam thinks not. "How," he asks, "can one propound this relativistic doctrine and still claim to believe that there is anything to the idea of 'externality', anything to the idea that there is something 'out there' independent of language and the mind?"[19] For Internal realism the answer is simple. Putnam invites us to consider the following example: Imagine a world of three individuals: x1, x2, and x3. How many *objects* are there? According to the logical system of Rudolph Carnap, there are

[15] "Brains in a Vat," pp. 27-42.

[16] Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1987), p. 17.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p. 32.

three objects. But some Polish logicians hold that for every two particulars there is an object that is their sum. So, instead of three objects, we have seven. Thus:

World 1 (Carnap's world)	World 2 (Polish logicians's world)
x1, x2, x3	x1, x2, x3, x1+x2, x1+x3, x2 +x3, x1+x2+x3

The answer to the question, "How many objects are there?," turns out to be a matter of choice. If I choose Carnap's language, there are three objects "*because that is how many objects there are*"; if I choose the Polish logicians's language, there are seven "*because that is how many objects there are*" (in the Polish logicians's sense of 'object'). Considerations such as this one lead Putnam to the conclusion that realism (with a small "r") is defensible only if we sign on to his conceptual relativism: "There are 'external facts's and we can say *what they are*. What we *cannot* say—because it makes no sense—is what the facts are *independent of all conceptual choices*."[20] (Putnam's emphases.)

This is a clear case of representationalism, for what we know about the external world depends on the way we choose to represent it, what conceptual scheme we wish to employ. But it is not a simple matter of choice, for, as noted above, Putnam thinks it unintelligible to ask for facts that are independent of all conceptual choices. That Putnam's next step is to embrace pragmatism should come as no surprise, then. The choice of one conceptual scheme over another has to be based, if it is a reasonable choice, on the probability that it will fulfill one's expectations more fully. His agreement with Quine and others that we should abandon the spectator viewpoint in metaphysics and epistemology in favor of the pragmatist view makes sense, given his conclusion that we cannot know external reality "independent of all conceptual choices." We are thus to accept the "reality" of abstract entities not because they are known to be real but because they are indispensable in mathematics; we are to accept the "reality" of microparticles and space-time points not because they are known to be real but because they are indispensable in physics; we are to accept the "reality" of tables and chairs not because they are known to be real but because they are indispensable in daily living.

[20] Ibid., pp. 33-34.

John Searle

I referred earlier to Searle's critique of epistemologies that deny our ability to know external reality. If any philosopher around today can remind us of the importance of linguistic hygiene, he is the one. Searle is suspicious of denials about our ability to know external reality. Like Putnam, but for quite different reasons, he holds that the affirmation of an independent external reality is compatible with alternative vocabularies. For example, depending on which system of weight is used, Searle weighs either 160 pounds or 73 kilograms. But he claims that any inconsistency between the two differing weights is merely apparent: "External realism [the affirmation of an independent external reality] allows for an infinite number of true descriptions of the same reality made relative to different conceptual schemes."[21] It is nonsensical to say that conceptual relativism leads to antirealism and equally so to say that one cannot at the same time weigh 160 pounds and 73 kilograms. Indeed, rather than posing an argument against realism, conceptual relativity presupposes realism "because it presupposes a language dependent reality that can be carved up or divided up in different ways, by different vocabularies."[22] Accordingly, Putnam's two worlds of logical discourse, the Carnapian and the Polish, presuppose something already there to be viewed as either three objects or seven.

The problem with Searle's critique of conceptual relativity is that it stops where it should have begun. Unless I know which, if any, of the alternative vocabularies or conceptual schemes accurately and truly mirrors external reality, how do I know that there is a reality independent of my representations at all? Searle admits that he cannot show that the statement, "The external world exists independently of our representations of it," is true. Here I would ask for a clarification. There is a logical difference between the statements, "I cannot show that the statement, 'The external world exists independently of our representations of it,'is true" and "It is impossible to show that the statement, 'The external world exists independently of our representations of it,'is true." First, does Searle mean simply that so far he has not found a way to prove external reality or does he mean that it cannot be proved at all? Second, regardless of his answer to the first question, does he hold that we nevertheless *know* to be true the statement, "The external world exists independently of our representations of it"? Although I do not know the answer

[21] John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), p. 165.

[22] Ibid.

to these questions, it seems a safe bet that Searle would say that unless we can prove that the external world exists independently of our representations of it, we cannot *know* that it exists independently of our representations of it. He does, as mentioned above, argue that "our ordinary linguistic practices presuppose external realism."[23] But, as I shall show below, that approach just as easily presupposes idealism. The difficulty here is that, if I do not know that an external world exists, I surely cannot know that there is any external reality that is "carved up or divided up" by our alternative vocabularies and conceptual schemes, no matter how alluring "our ordinary linguistic practices" make the presupposition of external realism. Given the premise of conceptual relativity, how do I know for sure that there is an external reality?

Although Searle correctly points out that the claim that there is an external reality is an ontological rather than epistemological claim, he has accomplished no more than showing that it is an ontological *concept*, as the following passage makes clear.

> 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.
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> 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 Mr. 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

[23] Ibid., p. 194.

> 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.[24]

I have quoted Searle at length here to show the full force of his argument. The above text shows no more than a conceptual or logical difference between external reality and our representations of it. His argument for realism establishes just this: if there is no external reality, then our public language is odd because it bespeaks an external reality that is independent of our representations of it. Well, so much the worse for our public language!

In fairness to Searle, it must be noted that, at he outset of his discussion, "Does the Real World Exist," he states that "a thorough discussion of these problems [representationalism vs. realism] would require at least another book."[25] Nevertheless, given the direction of his argument thus far, it is hard to see how even a whole other book could save him from idealism. For his argument for external reality does not differ, in principle, from Putnam's. Both justify their realism by an ultimate appeal to a coherence theory of one sort or another. For Putnam, the task is to depict external reality in a way that harmonizes, which is to say, is *coherent* with, one's chosen conceptual scheme; for Searle, the task is to show that our public language is conceptually coherent only if there is an external reality; but, since by his own admission, he cannot prove there is such a reality, the coherence is really between our public language and our *concept* of external reality, not external reality itself. Further than that, Searle cannot proceed since going from concept to reality is an illegitimate transition.

Putnam does, to be sure, advocate a pragmatic epistemology, for he says we should forsake a spectator epistemology in favor of an activist one. In this he is like Rorty, who also advocates pragmatism, but, in the end, the coherentist criterion must prevail. It is one thing for a pragmatist to say that our judgments and theories are verified by successful action and quite another to say what the standard of successful action is. That standard is this: *an action that is successful is one that is coherent with all the other propositions that compose my universe of discourse.* This in no way differs from the idealist's position: *All I know to exist are my ideas and myself.*

Note that the knowing subject plays a silent role in the "realism" of both Putnam and Searle. From Putnam's discourse, we detect an implicit subject who is both an observer and a designer: the subject takes a look at the mind's representations and decides how they can be used to further a plan of action,

[24] Ibid., pp. 186-87.
[25] Ibid., p. 150.

whether it is to do submicroscopic physics, mathematics, or Polish logic. From Searle's discourse, we detect the subject as an observer who verifies the mind's representations according to linguistic imperatives. In both instances, the subject's relationship to the known is, first, that of a detached observer "taking a look"; and second, a facilitator: "Does representation A or B or C best suit my objectives (whether those objectives be a plan of action or conformity to a set of linguistic rules)?" Their entire epistemological enterprise reminds one of a motivational expert, playing various videos to decide which one would most effectively motivate the corporation's sales representatives.

Rather than reach so far as to call Searle and Putnam idealists, I shall content myself by concluding this section with the observation that Searle and Putnam are *not realists of fact* but *realists of intention*. I make no attempt to classify Rorty in this regard, for, as I mentioned above, my point in addressing his "anti-representationalism" was to clarify my use of the word "representationalism."

I said above that Quine's proposal that epistemology be handed over to psychology made sense. Indeed, it was predictable, as is clear from the writings of Thomas Aquinas who, centuries ago, emphasized the absurd consequences of holding that the concept is what the intellect knows rather than that *by which* it knows. One of those consequences is the reduction of all the sciences to the discipline that we know today as psychology: "...the things we know are also the objects of science. Therefore, if what we understand is merely the intelligible species in the soul, it would follow that every science would be concerned, not with things outside the soul, but only with intelligible species within the soul."[26]

But what does it mean to say that the object of our knowledge is not the concept but rather what is known *by means of the concept*? The answer is found in an understanding of epistemological realism in its classic form, as espoused by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas and their twentieth century heirs, such as Jacques Maritain,[27] Étienne Gilson,[28] Yves R. Simon, [29] and Josef Pieper.[30]

[26] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 85, a. 2.

[27] Jacques Maritain, *The Degrees of Knowledge*, trans. Gerald B. Phelan (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

[28] Etienne Gilson, *Thomist Realism and the Critique of Knowledge,* trans. Mark A. Wauck (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986).

[29] Yves R. Simon, *An Introduction to Metaphysics of Knowledge*, trans. Vukan Kuic and Richard J. Thompson (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990).

[30] Josef Pieper, *Reality and the Good,* trans. Stella Lange (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1967).

Classical Realism

The principle of classical realism is *things are the measure of mind; mind is not the measure of things.* This principle follows from the premise that *we know extramental things spontaneously and certainly*. This accounts for the impossibility of demonstrating the existence of extramental reality. For one thing, nothing is more evident than the existence of things outside the mind. Searle is quite correct in his observation that "there is something puzzling about demanding an argument to show that the world exists independently of our representations of it."[31] Indeed, the very project of trying to find out what and how we know—which is what epistemology is all about—seems comically sadistic without the presupposition of extramental reality.[32] The classical thinkers would say that the existence of extramental reality is self-evident. That being so, then it is absurd to try to demonstrate what is directly evident to the senses by appealing to what is indirectly evident.[33] We know extramental things as real because we directly grasp them as real as a result of a primary intuition of actual being. This cannot be defended, however, if what we know are our representations of things rather than the things themselves. How did the classical epistemologists avoid representationalism? Thomas Aquinas, for example, rejected the claim that the concept is the object of knowledge, arguing instead that the concept is *that by which we know the thing*, so that the thing itself is the object of knowledge. But how can this be accomplished?

It is worth repeating that classical realism begins with the spontaneous knowledge of extramental things. (This confidence in our initial, spontaneous act of knowledge was shattered when Descartes cast doubt on common sense knowledge by employing his "methodical doubt.") Given this premise, the question is how is this possible? It was clear to Aristotle that the mind's direct knowledge of reality would be impossible if some third thing interposed itself between the knower and the thing known. That is why he says, "mind is, in a way, all things."[34] The alternative to representationalism is, in other words, the proposition that knowing consists of the mind becoming the other *as other*. As curious as that pronouncement may seem, that is the only way of accounting for the claim that we know extramental things directly and certainly. For, as noted above, if the object of my knowledge

[31] *The Construction of Social Reality*, p. 177.
[32] *Introduction to Metaphysics of Knowledge*, pp. 1-10.
[33] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, II, lect. 1, 8.
[34] Aristotle, *De Anima*, III, 8, 431 B20.

consisted of some third thing between knower and extramental thing, I could never know if there were, in fact, any extramental thing, let alone what its characteristics were.

When I say that contemporary epistemologists take the knower and his cognitive operations for granted. I mean that they talk about knowing as if it were nothing more than "taking a look." But what is involved in taking a look? Do plants and beetles and dogs take the kind of look that we call "knowing?" It skirts the issue to say that knowing is true belief and then spend all one's epistemological capital on the evidence for the belief, because that leaves us with the movie screen but no audience to view it. Knowledge requires not only an object that is known, not only evidence for believing that the assertion about the object is true, but also a knowing subject who is more than just one who is taking a look.

That the knower must know himself as the *subject* in order to know a thing *as object* is clear insofar as there is no knowing without a subject. It is *I*, the unique self-being that I am, who knows *x* to be true and *y* to be false." Knowing without a subject who is aware of himself as the *I* who does the knowing is as absurd as cinema in a universe without viewers. The self-awareness here cannot be an awareness of my observing myself, for that is simply to take a step backwards and not explain anything. All that accomplishes is to make the knower the *object* of knowledge, leaving the *subject*, for whom it is the object, unexplained.

Approached from another angle, consider the statement: "I thought I was aware of myself, but it turned out to be some other self I was aware of rather than myself." This is an absurd statement, is it not? Not necessarily. If self-awareness is construed only as a subject-object relation where *myself* is the *object* of my awareness, if it is construed only in the sense that I am aware of myself in the way I am aware of other people and things, then why could I not mistake some other self for myself? After all, I do, from time to time, mistake one person for another, believe that Mary is the one I met at the lecture when it was, in fact, Louise. But the above statement is surely absurd when "self-awareness" refers to myself as an *I* and not a *me*, when it refers to myself as a subject rather than an object. For then we are talking about a perfect act of reflection, so perfect that there is no subject-object distinction, no object that the knowing subject can mistakenly identify. Even a lunatic who thinks he is Napoleon Bonapart cannot be mistaken in his self-awareness. His error lies in believing that his *I* is identical to the being known as Napoleon Bonapart, not in self-identifying knowledge. That is logically impossible.

This shows that there are two importantly different senses of the term, "self-awareness." The first and common usage refers to *explicit* self-aware-

ness. That is the awareness that I have when I am introspective or self-conscious, as when I am aware of myself while performing certain tasks, like writing this sentence. But this very act requires a subject who is aware of himself not as an object but as a subject: not "I know me," but "I know I." This second usage of "self-awareness" refers not to an *explicit* self-awareness but to a *concomitant* self-awareness. So it is not mere self-awareness that allows knowledge but awareness of self *as subject*. Otherwise there could be no objectification. Objectification requires that the thing known be known *as other*. If it is not known *as other*, then all knowledge, so-called, would be subjective: everything I perceived would be *a-thing-for-me*. When a dog perceives its master, it perceives a thing other than itself, but there is no evidence that the dog thereby *conceptualizes* its master. Canine behavior can be explained, if not by a stimulus-response relation with the sensuous image of its master, then to a merely perceptual inference based on an association of images.[35] But if I do not know myself as subject, I cannot know anything *as other* since things known *as other* have meaning only in relation to a self. It is the knowledge of oneself as subject, not as object, that allows the relation to the *other-than-I*, the other *as other*.

An Historical Incident

The debate between Thomas Aquinas and the Averroists illuminates, in a singular way, the indispensable role of the self in knowing. And in doing so, it reinforces my example above about the impossibility, even for a lunatic who believes he is Napoleon Bonapart, of mistaking oneself for someone else.

Averroes argued that the correct interpretation of Aristotle's treatise on the soul was that human beings had material souls. His reasoning, based on a close reading of the text, was as follows: (1) all sensible beings are composed of the co-principles, matter (potency) and form (act); (2) living sensible beings have the soul as their form; it is their *entelechy* or principle of living organization; (3) the soul of a human being is the principle of his organization; it must therefore be a material soul, since it is the principle a material being. But to explain how Aristotle can, at the same time, hold that knowing requires an immaterial intellect, Averroes offered his theory of the *continuatio*. According to this theory, an individual human is able to know by using his material intellectual faculty and phantasm as a kind of plug-in to the one, transcendent agent intellect, which is immaterial.

[35] See Mortimer J. Adler, *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), pp. 136-37.

Thomas Aquinas's criticism of the *continuatio* has its roots in the Aristotelian formula that difference is caused by form. Because the human being differs from other beings by virtue of his rationality, the intellectual principle must be his substantial form.[36] Averroes was hardly ignorant of the need for personal identity in knowing. He was persuaded that his *continuatio* explained how this particular human can be said to know when there is only one intellect for all humans. Using the Aristotelian principle that proper operation comes from form, Averroes held that, since knowing is man's proper operation, the separate intellect must somehow be a form in him. Although the intellect is not a power of the human soul, it is apparently always at his disposal. He is able to know whatever his wishes[37].

But all this would be impossible, on Averroes's view, if the human soul were not especially adapted to the use of the separate intellect. Indeed, without the human soul, with its own enmattered cogitative powers, the separate intellect could not operate.[38] Despite this attribution of mutual dependence, Averroes nevertheless draws a sharp distinction between the soul of the individual human and the separate intellect. He maintains that the intellect is neither the soul nor a part of the soul. The soul is the first act of a physical, organic body, but the intellect is superior to the soul.[39]

As stated above, it is at this point of the intellect's separation from the soul that Aquinas directs his criticism. If the intellect is not a power of the individual soul, then the individual human simply is not the one who knows. This seems a fatal objection to the *continuatio*. This criticism can only originate in the proposition I have been arguing, to wit, that in order to know an object, the intellect must first know itself as the subject who is doing the knowing. One can find further support for it in other of Aquinas's texts.[40] This line of attack devastates the Averroist position, since the one intellect would always know itself as the knower, regardless of the individual humans who might share in its operations.

[36] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 76, a. 1.

[37] Averroes, *In De Anima*, III, t.c. 36, (lines 518-598).

[38] "*Iste igitur intellectus passibilis necessarius est in formatione...Idest virtue imaginativa et cogitativa nichil intelligit intellectus qui dicitur materialis; hee enim virtutes sunt quasi res que preparant materiam artificii ad recipiendum actionem artificii.*" *In De Anima*, III, 36, 518-598.

[39] *In De Anima*, III, t.c. 5, (lines 27-38); t.c. 32; see Beatrice Zedler, "Averroes and Immortality," *The New Scholasticism*, 28 (1958), p. 437.

[40] Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate*, X, 8, *De Unitate Intellectus* III, IV, and *De Spiritualibus Creaturis* IX; see also, Gerad Verbecke, "L'unite de l'homme: Saint Thomas contre Averroes," in *Revue Philosophique de Louvain*, 58 (1960), pp. 220-49.

While the textual evidence cited shows that Averroes and Aquinas both recognize the necessity of the subject knowing himself *as subject* in order to know, Aquinas rejection of the *continuatio* reveals a deeper insight into the role of personal identity. If the individual did not know himself as the knower, how could there be any such thing as knowledge at all? How could we say that Plato knows if Plato does not know himself as the subject who knows? As noted in the previous section of this essay, the self-knowledge in question here is not psychological awareness (knowledge of the self *as object*) but rather an ontological awareness: we are not consciously aware of knowing ourselves as subject, but when we analyze the act of knowing, we see that knowing would be impossible without it.

Knowing Things

I believe that the eclipse of the knowing subject in contemporary epistemology started with Descartes's method of suspending in doubt everything that cannot be demonstrated as necessarily true or apprehended as clear and distinct. This dichotomized reason and common sense; for some truths entertained by common sense defy demonstration, as, for example, the claim that things exist outside and independently of the mind. Subsequently, the epistemological emphasis was invested in the project of trying to prove the unprovable. If, on the contrary, we begin epistemology with the premise that, although it is impossible to demonstrate, we know extramental things spontaneously and certainty, then the first question to be answered is: What is knowing and how does it work? The attempt to find an answer directs our attention to the knowing subject. How?

On the premise that we do know extramental things, it follows that the object of knowledge and the thing must be identical. To reiterate, that means that there cannot be any third thing between the object of knowledge and the thing. For then what we would know would not be the thing but rather our representation of the thing. In fact, we would have no conclusive knowledge that there was any thing other than our representation. But since we do know extramental things, we must accept the conclusion that the knowing subject becomes the thing it knows.

If what we know are *things, extramental entities, existents*, it follows that, because there can be no third thing between knower and known, the knower must become the known. There are three possibilities, at least in terms of a logical division, for explaining how this happens. First, the knower becomes the known thing in the latter's physical nature. That will not work because it would violate the principles of identity and contradiction: knowl-

edge of an oak tree would then require that the knower be the knower and the physical tree at the same time. Second, we could revisit the principle espoused by Empedocles, "Like knows like"; the faculty that knows the real must be the same as the real—not entitatively the same, but of the same stuff—as the real: in order to know fire, the intellect must be fire, to know matter, it must be matter, to know movement, it must be movement, etc. The trouble with this demand for a direct apprehension of reality without any conceptual likeness of the object, formed according to the subject's mode of being, is that it reduces knowledge to an identification of the subject and object, but according to the object's mode of being. Objective knowledge would thus be impossible because the subject-object relationship on which objective knowledge depends would be destroyed, as the object absorbed the subject.[41] But knowledge of an object, *as object*, requires that the knowing subject retain possession of itself; know itself as the subject who knows the object. In other words, the knowing subject dominates the object.

This leaves the third possibility as the only viable candidate. The object known is in the subject according to the mode of the subject, which is to say, the knower becomes the known on the intentional level according to the immateriality of the intellect. From the metaphysical standpoint, this amounts to two entities, the thing known and the immaterial likeness that the knowing subject has become. From the epistemological standpoint, however, there is only one entity, the intellect having become the immaterial likeness of the thing known. In the words of Yves R. Simon:

> When one thing is united to another, the usual result is a third thing made of the first two. When the soul is joined to a body, the result is man. When man is joined to virtue, the result is the virtuous man. When the wax is to the impression of the seal, the result is stamped wax. But when an object of knowledge is joined to a knowing subject, no composite results from that union. We think of the union of a physical form with its matter, and we come up with a whole, composed of form and matter. But when we consider the union of an object of knowledge with a knowing subject, we come up with an entirely different kind of whole. Here there is no fusion of two realities into a third reality. If this whole possesses unity, it is because the subject has become the object, and this unity, in the famous phrase of Averroes, so often repeated by Latin Aristotelians, is the most intimate of all.[42]

[41] Jacques Maritain, *Bergsonian Philosophy and Thomism*, trans. Mabelle L. and J. Gordon Andison (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955), pp. 107-08.

[42] Yves R. Simon, *An Introduction to Metaphysics of Knowledge*, p. 10.

The primary and fundamental premise of epistemological realism—things exist independently of our minds and we can know some of these things certainly and truly—demands this perfect entitative unity. It is explainable in no other way.

Admittedly, the explanation of how this union between knower and known takes place is every bit as marvelous as the above explanation of intentionality. Because we do know things and because knowing consists in the knower and the known becoming one, it follows that the intellect must somehow create an exact likeness of the thing known. Aristotle provided us with the solution. Through the external senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch—we form a phantasm, a sensuous image, of the external thing. This requires a process of reconstruction. Since the senses are immersed in matter and matter is the principle of specification, each of the aforesaid senses has its own special object: sight, color; hearing, sound; etc. Coming into the subject separately, they must be reunited into a single, unified image. This is not knowing, but rather its precondition. We are safe in assuming that even the higher animals possess the capacity to form phantasms. As an image, it is completely material, having size, shape, and if it were possible to extend its sensible properties, taste and smell as well.

Knowing occurs when the intellect is able to "define" the object to itself, when it is able to grasp *deskness*, say, in the image of a desk. But this cannot occur as long as the object remains enmattered, for matter is the enemy of knowledge. That is why neither science nor philosophy can address the individual as such. Physics can predict the behavior of electrons but only of electrons as a group, about which it can make statistical correlations; it cannot predict the behavior any one electron as an *individual*. Philosophy can define man as a type but not as an individual. If George is a man, I can define him as *rational animal*, but I cannot define him, *genus et differentia*, as individual. I can only define an individual, whether electron or human being, ostensively; that is to say, by pointing him out. The reason individuals cannot be defined *as such* is the same reason that prevents them from being known *as such*: they are individuated by reason of being immersed in matter and matter resists knowledge. As Thomas Aquinas notes, matter contracts the object when, on the contrary, intelligibility requires universality.[43] For example, I recognize the polygon on the poster as a triangle because I grasp in it the form of *triangularity*. If I could not manage that abstraction, I would only be able to grasp the particular polygon's specific characteristics; I would not be able to grasp its intelligible structure. Now triangularity is a universal

[43] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 86, a. 1.

and, as such, it applies to all polygons whose interior angles equal the sum of two right angles, but to no such polygon in particular. We do not, after all, say of a particular triangle, "*X* is triangularity," but rather, "*X* is a triangle."

Plato was the first thinker, at least in the West, to distinguish between sensation and knowledge.[44] So clearly did he see the difference that he had no recourse but to dichotomize them: sensation pertained exclusively to sensible objects while intellection pertained exclusively to the immaterial world of pure Forms. His pupil, Aristotle, took the Forms from their ethereal habitat and placed them in material things. Reversing the order of Plato, he insisted that the Forms were "secondary substance" and things were "primary substance." What existed were individual horses, not horsiness. But, now, he had to explain how we traveled from the perception of individual, material things to abstract, universal ideas. To account for our knowledge of things, Aristotle was faced with the task of showing how we freed their intelligible structures from their enmattered state.

This he accomplished by coming up with the theory of abstraction. The intellect focuses on the intelligible structure embedded in the sensible phantasm and, in that way, abstracts the former, thereby freeing it from the contractions of matter. It then makes an immaterial likeness of the intelligible species (known as the *impressed species*) and becomes it (known as the *expressed species*). Then, and not before then, the subject knows the thing. And that is what Aristotle means by saying that "intellect is, in a way, all things."

What is clear from the above account is that knowing is not "taking a look" but a way of being, a becoming of the other *as other*. In the tradition that Aristotle thus fathered, knowing is seen as a way of enriching the ontological status of the knower. Whereas subrational beings are enclosed in, and limited by, their own forms, rational beings overcome the limitation of their forms by becoming the forms of other things without losing their own.

Knowing oneself as a subject rather than an object, as an *I* rather than a *me*, is possible only in a being whose intellect is an immaterial substance, for no material substance can perform the act of perfect self-reflection that such self-awareness is. Physical things can bend back on themselves (self-reflect), but not perfectly. When, for example, I fold a sheet of paper in half, the result is an imperfect reflection, for what I have done is bend the top half of the paper over onto the bottom half. The intellect's immateriality is also evinced by the knowing operation itself. The ability to free the intelligible form from the material constraints of the phantasm and to become it while remaining

[44] Plato, *Theaetetus*, 184b-186e.

itself cannot be accomplished by a purely material being. *Per impossibile*, if a donkey could become a lion, it could do so only by destroying itself as a donkey since it would be impossible for it to be a donkey and a lion at the same time and in the same respect. In knowing, on the contrary, the knower fashions an identical replication of the form in the extramental thing and becomes it while remaining its unique self. Whereas a material substance cannot be in two places at the same time, its immaterial form can. And having become the form of the other, the subject, by knowing himself as subject, knows the thing.

To dismiss this explanation on account of its appeal to immateriality betrays a failure to appreciate our direct experiential knowledge of the world around us. We do know, and what we know are things. Any theory of knowledge that loses sight of that primary truth is bound to embrace representationalism and, finally, idealism. The materialization of the intellect and the self eliminates the possibility of objective knowledge from the very start. Objectivity requires a formal causality whereby the intellect replicates an identical copy of the intelligible form of the thing known. Such replication can occur only through the active agency of an immaterial entity. I say "active" because knowing is an act, a reaching out of the self to the non-self. To reiterate, knowing is a becoming, a way of being, an activity by which the self overcomes its limitations by becoming the other, *as other*, while retaining its own unique selfhood.

The materialization of the intellect replaces the subject with an *object*, for matter is passive.[45] Consider, again, the claim that the objectivity of knowledge requires that the concept of the thing known be its identical copy, so that, metaphysically speaking, the concept and the thing of which it is the concept are two entities; but, epistemologically, they are one insofar as, from the standpoint of intelligible structure, there is no difference between them. To effect this, the intellect must *act* on the phantasm by focusing on its intelligible content and, by formal causality, replicating it. But if the intellect is material, formal causality is replaced by efficient causality, and, because a thing is passive to the extent that it is material, the thing known acts upon the knower. That the knower may act on the thing known as well is an irrelevant consideration with regard to objective knowledge. Efficient causality produces an effect that, although containing, in some sense, the likeness of the causal agent, remains importantly different from it. If, for example, I photograph my family, I make an impression on film that is of their likeness. But the impression is hardly

[45] *Introduction to Metaphysics of Knowledge*, pp. 39-42.

identical to them. This disparity results from the limitations of the film: it can reproduce my family only to the extent that photographic film can. What we have here, therefore, is not an identical replication but a third thing, different from both my actual family and the film.[46]

Representationalism is the child of a materialist conception of the knowing self. The concept or representation is an *effect* of an efficient cause and, as such, can only represent the thing of which it is the putative representation according to the ability of a materialized self to do so. Above, I said that Descartes's "methodical doubt" burdened philosophy with an impossible task. By casting the shadow of doubt over what the intellect knows spontaneously and certainly to be true, to wit, that things exist outside and independently of the mind, he condemned epistemologists to an reenactment of the sentence the gods imposed on Sisyphus: no matter how industriously and brilliantly they work to establish what the human mind can know, their approach to the answer is always asymptotic; close enough to be tantalizing, yet doomed to veer away, back to the starting point. Had subsequent epistemology not followed his lead by trying to demonstrate the existence of things outside the mind and contented itself instead to finding out how our knowledge of extramental things took place, it is quite possible that the role of the knowing subject in knowledge would not have been eclipsed.

Conclusion

There is an irony in all this. Descartes started his philosophy as if the self existed in a vacuum and could thus know itself directly and purely before any experiences of external reality. After pronouncing his "*Cogito, ergo sum*," he then proceeded to demonstrate the existence of things outside his mind by appealing to the absolute perfection and goodness of God who surely could not have created in us faculties that mislead us into concluding that things existed when they, in fact, did not[47]. But this triumph was bound to evaporate. He failed and he did so for two reasons. First, he flouted the correct order of knowing. As Gilson noted, if you start your philosophizing inside your mind, you will never get outside it.[48] It is extramental things that we know first; then we reflect on the knowing operation itself; and finally we are

[46] Raymond Dennehy, "The Ontological Basis of Human Rights," *The Thomist* 42 (1978) pp. 434-63, esp. p. 440 or Raymond Dennehy, *Reason and Dignity* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), p. 44.

[47] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation V.

[48] Étienne Gilson, "Vade Mecum of a Young Realist" in *Philosophy of Knowledge*, eds. Roland Houde and Joseph P. Mullally (Chicago: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1960), p. 387.

aware of ourselves as the knowing subject.[49] The second reason is exemplified in Duns Scotus's reply to Henry of Ghent's claim that it is impossible to attain "certain and unadulterated truth" naturally in this life without divine illumination. Scotus pointed out that if our natural knowledge of things is uncertain, it is impossible to make it certain by divine illumination: "...no certitude is possible where something incompatible with certitude concurs. For just as we can infer only a contingent proposition from a necessary and contingent proposition combined, so also a concurrence of what is certain and what is not uncertain does not produce certain knowledge."[50]

Our failures should teach us, but their lessons often go unheeded. Even those most critical of Cartesianism and the rationalist tradition find irresistible the temptation to start their philosophy in the mind rather than with things. Consider the following passage from John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: "...I thought that the first step towards satisfying several inquiries the mind of man was very apt to run into, was to take a survey of our own understanding, examine our own powers, and see to what things they were adapted. Till that was done, I suspected we began at the wrong end...."[51] Is it not curious that an empiricist, bent on showing that the rationalism of Descartes and his followers was profoundly mistaken in supposing that human knowledge originated in any other way than through the senses, should have begun his philosphical labors by paying attention to the phenomena within the mind rather than on what the mind knows about the world? And no one can ever accuse Immanuel Kant of ignoring the knowing subject. He must be given the credit for returning modern philosophy's attention to the knowing subject's contribution to our knowledge of the external world. Only, he seems to have confused the first and second orders of intentionality, thereby assigning to the mind the wrong role in our knowledge of the world. Locke's efforts led to Hume's phenomenalism, while Kant's attempt to save the objectivity of knowledge ushered in German idealism. The irony is that by starting with the knowing subject instead of with extramental things, modern philosophy soon found that not only was it increasingly difficult to justify claims of an external reality, it had also lost the knowing subject.

[49] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 14, a. 2; q. 87, a. 1.

[50] Duns Scotus, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Allan Wolter, (Indianapolis, Indiana: The Bobbs Merrill Co., 1964), p. 112.

[51] John Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* ed. Alexander Campbell Frazier (New York: Dover Publications, 1959), Vol. 1, p. 31.