

## *Knowing Reality*

Although our attempts to understand knowledge largely concern internal features, such as the roles of truth, belief, certainty, and justification, the limits of knowledge are set by our understanding of the nature of reality. Accounts of basic reality are the task of metaphysics, but modern thinkers see the human mind as deeply involved in those accounts, and the limits and aspirations of possible knowledge are partly set by the 'border' (if there is one) between mind and reality. We can arrange the options on a spectrum, ranging from direct knowledge of an independent reality at one end ('naïve realism'), to a picture of apparent reality generated entirely by the mind at the other ('solipsism'). The main views between these extremes are direct realism, representative realism, phenomenalism, and idealism.

**Naïve realism** says that reality simply is the way it appears to be. The moon is round, tomatoes are red, dogs bark loudly, gravity pulls things down – what's the problem? Empirical science starts from that initial assumption, and describes the patterns and regularities in appearances, aiming to give us the truth about reality. The theory is labelled 'naïve' because it is the investigations of science itself which have undermined this attractively simple assumption that experience matches reality. It was discovered that some people are colour-blind, and experience a different colour when seeing tomatoes. Unlike humans, insects can see ultra-violet light, presumably in a colour we cannot imagine. Our rainbow of colours turns out to be that part of the electro-magnetic spectrum to which our brains can respond. Tomatoes are red to humans, but who knows what they look like to insects? We can also dream of tomatoes, and even have tomato hallucinations. Since people can actually believe these illusions, there seems no way to prove that our normal experiences are not totally illusory, which thus dramatically undermines naïve realism. We must infer that only careful study can disentangle objective reality from our subjective experiences of it.

The initial response to these findings focused on the 'gap' between experience and reality, leading first to a division of the qualities we experience into reliable 'primary' ones (like shape) and less reliable 'secondary' ones (like colour), then to fears that we only had the experiences ('sense-data') to go on, which are totally subjective, and many thinkers became highly sceptical, deducing that the 'gap' was unbridgeable and objectivity impossible. A modern rebellion against this trend has proposed that naïve realism is not so daft if you eliminate the naivety. In the case of colour, two people may have slightly different experiences of a tomato, but they are still directly perceiving a real fact about the surface of the tomato, each in their own way. This is **direct realism**, and one variant of this is the 'adverbial' theory, which says that you experience tomatoes 'redly', but your colour-blind friend experiences them 'purply'. We can respond to the illusion problem with 'disjunctivism', which says that sensing reality and having an illusion are actually quite different experiences, and cannot be confused by a clear and healthy mind.

If these attempts to save direct realism do not satisfy you, the best remaining theory of external reality is **representative realism**. The earliest version of this was sense-data theory, proposing that we experience not reality, but atoms of experience which are gradually assembled into knowledge. The existence of such entities looked speculative and problematic, so modern versions draw on neuroscience to see various 'processes' (e.g. in the retina, and then the visual cortex, then the rest of the brain) as the representations. The role of concepts, reason and belief in such contact with reality is then carefully assessed. Critics either dislike the way in which these representative processes seem to prevent common sense contact with reality, or say that we are back with a 'gap' between one end of the processes and the other, leaving objectivity once again impossible. The pessimistic realists say the best we can hope for is a remote unknowable reality (the 'noumenon') presumed to exist behind a veil of experiences.

More drastic responses to these difficulties say that it is more intellectually honest to give up claiming that we are in contact with a bogus entity called 'reality'. Instead we should just report what we actually experience, and build our knowledge out of that, carefully avoiding any claims which exceed our abilities. This **phenomenalist** view defines an object as an enduring possibility of sensation, so that our knowledge is entirely restricted to what is perceivable. A chair is just the sum of experiences had by observers. The chair in the vacant room next door is the experiences which can be had by observers who enter that room. The linguistic version of phenomenalism claims (optimistically, perhaps) that all of our talk of objects, forces etc. can be translated into sentences that simply report experiences. Phenomenalists aim for a coherent scientific theory of the world which is 'empirically adequate', because it incorporates all of our actual and predicted experiences, and makes no claims that go beyond them. Critics say that any gaps in our experience are holes in 'reality', and that the theory doesn't explain causation and change well, or give a decent account of the self, and other inner features of mind, which seem to be 'behind' experience. The claim that a brick is just a bunch of sensations is certainly a long way from naïve realism!

If claims about possible experiences of the chair next door seem to lack the intellectual integrity that was sought (because they are not actual experiences), then **idealism** is the next stop on the spectrum. We must face up to the fact that we are trapped in a world of experiences, with no knowledge of what is beyond. The best we can hope for is contact with other minds, to pool our experiences and build a sensible map of the undeniable patterns (of chairs, trees etc) which fill our minds, and we may even hope for a divine mind to fill the gaps in our pooled experience. We might presume that we have bodies (though their minds are isolated), and we might still boldly talk about chairs, while secretly acknowledging that they are no more than bundles of experiences. We will, of course, have no grounds for distinguishing illusions and perceptual errors from so-called 'veridical' (truthful) experience.

Once we are in the cautious mode, we should obviously be suspicious about the claim that other minds exist, since that is an interpretation of a private experience in our own minds, and this thought pushes us to the far end of the spectrum, and **solipsism**. So-called 'reality' is now just our private individual experiences. Here we have the reassurance of complete intellectual integrity, by making no claims beyond what is in our minds, but the distressing prospect that all talk of reality and other minds is a total delusion. No good philosopher has ever embraced solipsism, but it is a permanent landmark in the intellectual landscape, at the end of an inviting but alarming train of thought.