REALISM, HOLISM AND SELF-JUSTIFICATION

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In modern debate about realism - carried on in different areas and in various terminological frameworks - it is sometimes suggested that there is a way of resolving it that does not amount to a form of realism or anti-realism, but significantly goes beyond this opposition, or rather shows why one should refuse to take part in the debate. This view is attributed by some philosophers to the later Wittgenstein who - according to them - has convincingly pointed out what is wrong with the whole debate. The most interesting construals along these lines were put forward in recent years. They pay less attention to Wittgensteinian deflationary metaphilosophy, where philosophy is conceived as an unsystematic therapy avoiding any theory, and stress more his positive views on the nature of concepts and language. One such construal has been developed by Jane Heal.[1] Her views on this matter are worth discussing not only in the context of Wittgenstein exegetical scholarship, but also in the more substantive philosophical context. For she wants, after all, to say not what Wittgenstein might think about the issue of realism but that the *right* approach to the issue consists in and how it is to be supported.

In what follows I shall present Heal's approach to the realism debate and subsequently discuss the problems that her apparently intermediate and noncommittal view causes. It seems to me that the final outcome of this discussion contributes to the plausibility of the general claim that it is rather impossible to show why one should refuse to take part in the realism/anti-realism debate, or go significantly beyond it without committing oneself to a full-fledged realism or anti-realism. In other words; there is no third option in this debate.

'I

Heal starts from an account of what are the most basic elements in our realist practices'. Or what are largely uncontroversial necessary conditions of being a realist about any subject matter. She notices first that in most regions oruses of language not all language moves are permissible. That is to say, there are incompatible pairs of sentences, and when we sincerely assert one of them. e.g. This is a melon', we cannot, without self-stultification, assert another, 'This is not a melon', or 'This is an apple'. And she calls this idea that the two incompatible statements are not acceptable 'the principle of contradiction'. However it is worth noticing that although Heal makes here use of a term that is familiar to those having at least slight acquaintance with formal logic, this principle is not strictly the same as the relevant formal principle, since incompatibility, according to her, holds not only between statements where one is formed from another by addition of negation. Incompatibility is determined in most cases on the basis of content of the involved expressions, and not only on the basis of their form. Obeying a principle of contradiction so understood is the first necessary condition of being a realist, thus if any region of discourse is not subject to this principle (e.g. moral discourse), it cannot be interpreted realistically.

The second necessary condition of being a realist about any subject matter is taking for granted that the subject matter is independent of our thoughts. In other words, "the mere existence and nature of my thought does not constitute the existence of what it is thought about, i.e., does not make the thought correct".[2] Heal notices that this statement of what is called by her 'epstiemological independence' is sometimes connected with other controversial claims, for instance. that there is a reasonable possibility that each of my beliefs is false, or even if we agree on some ideally well established theory, it can turn out to be false. But these are additional claims which need not form part of a realist standpoint.

The third necessary condition of realism is connected with the attitude towards disagreements concerning which one of the incompatible moves should be made. According to realists the disagreements are to be continued until we reach either agreement on the question involved. or we recognize that it is impossible to make the final verdict on the issue and to remove the disagreement. Heal puts this point in the following way :

> So the realist thinks that there is a defensible hope of convergence - in the
> somewhat limited sense that if a verdict on the matter is reached at all it
> will, with enough open mindedness and in favourable conditions of investiga-
> tion be the same verdict. But this does not commit him to thinking that
> every question which is realistically construed, and rightly so construed, is
> in fact resoluble even in principle.[3]

These three conditions constitute what is the most basic in our realist practic-
es. They form what Heal describes as minimal realism. But the natural question
arises why we accept this minimal realism, and whether we can give such an
explanation of it which at the same time justifies it. In other words : is it possible
to produce a *Justificatory explanation* of our realist practices, and what form can
this explanation take ? According to Heal there are three possible kinds of such
an explanation, namely, mirroring realism, pragmatism and quietism, but only the
last is defensible.

Mirroring realism dwells heavily on and elaborates the second condition
of minimal realism. It claims that our realist practices are to be explained by the
fact that we are confronted with an independent world with a determinate char-
acter or nature, and our concepts correspond closely to the natural kinds existing
in the world. Moreover, at least some of our thinking grasps accurately the world
as it is in itself.

> We may say, then, that this mirroring perspective on our realist practices
> adds to the *epistemological* independence emphasized in minimal realism
> the extremely important extra element of *conceptual* independence. It is
> not only our individual judgements which are answerable to something
> other than themselves for their truth or falsity; the very concepts in terms
> of which they are couched must also(if the judgements are to be of the
> real) answer to something' out there' and independent of us.[5]

Heal criticizes two kinds of mirroring realism : sense datum empiricism which
can be discerned as an important factor in Quine's work and B. Willams' idea of
an absolute conception of the world. Let us take for granted, for the sake of
argument, that these criticisms are correct and can be easily generalized to all
varieties of mirroring realism. So we can now consider the second way of ex-
planation and justification of minimal realism, namely pragmatism.

According to pragmatism the only way to explain and justify our realist practices is to point out that these practices are useful for us, help us to cope with the world, etc. The minimal realism is then adopted as the result of a *decision:*

> For the thorough going pragmatist then, everything, including the very idea of there being incompatible judgements obeying the law of non-contradiction, is up for grabs. There is no feature of current practice which he is not prepared to contemplate abandoning; and his taking seriously what he does now take seriously is, he says, the outcome of choice.[6]

For many, stresses Heal, such an explanation will be unsatisfactory , since according to them this explanation should proceed on the level of opinion, and not decision. But even if this case against pragmatism could be dismissed as simply question begging, there is a still deeper and more devastating challenge the impossibility of explaining within the pragmatist framework the pressure of that what seems to be somewhat given, what impinges on us and with what we must actively cope. Thus pragmatism not only is unable to explain and justify minimal realism, but rather requires it for its own justification.

The only promising way of explanation and justification of minimal realism seems to be then quietist realism. Heal gives the following description of this standpoint:

> Quietist realism finds both pragmatist and mirroring realist attempts at justification of linguistic practice misguided. It denies that we can make any sense of the choice that the pragmatist supposes us to make and denies also that the idea of a, so to speak, pre-sliced world makes sense. It invites us instead to become aware of the interlocking complexities of our thought and action and to become aware also of how little sense or use we can make of the idea of (certain sorts of) things being otherwise.[7]

This general description receives more determinate shape when Heal discusses the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein, which she treats as the most vivid and characteristic expression of quietist realism. 'The interlocking complexities of our thought and action' are expounded by way of a closelink between our interests and projects, on the one side, and our concepts and judgements, on the other side. 'Close' in this context means the following; this link is not external and

contingent, and therefore it is not that we have fully determined sets of concepts or judgements and decide, on the basis of our interests and projects, which of them will actually be used by us. It is rather that out interests and projects are constitutive of our concepts and judgements. They all together form a part of the way we live our lives and cope with the world. However, although - contrary to mirroring realism- we are makers of our concepts and judgements, it does not mean that we also make them correct ones. There is an important role which the world has to play here. As Heal neatly puts it :

> Our situation then is this. We are not in a position to determine the success
> of our enterprises. We propose things to the world, but the world disposes. [8]

From these elucidations one can infer why there is 'little sense or use we can make of the idea of (certain sorts of) things being otherwise'. Since all our concepts, judgements, interests, and projects constitute an interlocked whole, any new concepts and any new connections established (e.g. by proof) change this whole and modify the range of possibilities. We can have no guarantee at any point that we have considered all possibilities, that we have taken into account all ways things could be different. They are merely possibilities from a partic- ular point of our way of life, and other possibilities might emerge.

II

Quietism, as presented above, appears - at the first sight - to be a modest and reasonable view that is opposed to two positions deriving" from the ill-con- ceived notion that reflection may somehow capture an Olympian standpoint from which the claim to objectivity of a linguistic practice - a language game' - can be reviewed'.[9] But, of course, if quietist realism is to be satisfactory, it must tell us why reflections cannot reach this 'Olympian standpoint'.

It seems that the first and important step towards justification of quietist stance on the realism debate should be the viability of holism, which is arguably the crucial doctrine of this stance. Roughly speaking this is a doctrine claiming 'that our concepts do not come isolated. To understand a concept is to see it at work in its setting'.[10] One can conclude from this statement and the above presentation of Heal's position, that the holism that is involved here is a version of semantic

holism. It mainly affects an account of how meanings of our words are consti-
tuted and grasped. Heal does not claim that her holism ascribes meaning prima-
rily to certain whole (entire theories, language games, etc.) and only derivatively
to smaller units, as words or sentences. She argues that meanings are quite prop-
erly, and in no secondary sense, ascribed to such smaller units, but at the same
time insists that a necessary condition of having these meanings is the presence
and absence of other meaningful elements. Thus according to a semantic holism
which she is prepared to defend :

> The meaningfulness of the whole is not prior to that of the parts, in any
> significant way, conceptually, causally or metaphysically. We cannot make
> sense of the idea that the whole should have meanings it does without the
> individual parts bearing their appropriate meanings. So the slogan the
> fundamental unit of meaning is the whole' would be highly misleading as
> a summary of this sort of holism...The central idea now is rather that mean-
> ing necessarily involves complexity.[11]

Heal believes that her 'moderate' semantic holism is significantly different from
the semantic holism discussed and criticized by J. Fodor.[12] The latter is based
on the idea that the identity of a propositional attitude is determined by the totality
of its epistemic relationships, and leads to a preposterous consequence that two persons
differing in their views about these relationships cannot share any propositional
attitude and hence mean the same by any statements which they make. In other
words, if we take any two individuals we can be faced only with two possibilities :
they have exactly the same propositional attitudes (beliefs, etc.,) or totally differ-
ent. Heal thinks that she is able to avoid the preposterous consequence, since her
holism requires merely that in the constitution and expression of meaning the
whole of a person's utterances plays a certain role. She writes:

> But we have not said that there will be only one suitable setting in which
> a given meaning can occur, so we are not committed to the view that any
> difference between two whole must make every meaning expressed in the
> other. And to say...that every statement in a whole collection is relevant
> to (has a potential bearing on) the meaning of any other given statement
> is not to say that a change in the former must necessarily correlate with
> change in the meaning assigned to the latter.[13]

However such an assurance is hardly convincing without some explanation of what besides the wholes, individuate the meanings of individual words or concepts and sentences or beliefs, and is in fact, a prevailing factor in keeping their identities.

One possible explanation is suggested by a certain interpretation of the above mentioned slogan : 'We propose things to the world, but the world disposes'. Maybe it is so that our concepts and beliefs are individuated, for the most part, by their causal connections with the world. This would allow us to say that a given concept or belief can be a part of various wholes, being all the time the same concept of belief due to the fact that it was caused by the same state of affairs. Not withstanding the current popularity of this line of thought, Heal is not ready to embark on it. The main reasons are not only the well-know troubles with singling out the relevant causes of a given concept or belief and excluding so-called 'deviant' causal chains, but first and foremost that according to quietist realism when states of affairs or facts 'impinge upon' a person, they encounter a subject already possessing a complex set of beliefs and living a specific life. This being so, the 'output', in the form of a concept or belief, depends on a given occasion not only upon current 'input' but also upon previous and innumerable inputs. If we take this seriously, it is rather unlikely that the causal factor will be able to keep the identities of concepts or beliefs across different meaningful wholes.

Another explanation of the preservation of these identities relies on the idea of the stable analytical or logical connections between the elements of our language of discourse. The existence of such a framework allows us to claim that in different wholes we have still the same concept or belief because it has the same inferential or deductive powers, etc. But the availability of this explanation depends on accepting the analytic-synthetic dichotomy and on an account of the stability of logical connections. But this explanation is scarcely available to Heal. She is not prepared to embrace the analytic-synthetic dichotomy. Indeed she seems sympathetic to the Wittgensteinian line in the philosophy of mathematics, the line hostile to Platonism and conventionalism but agreeing in the end that the logical or mathematical necessities are essentially conditional upon our linguistic practices that might be perhaps changed, although at present we do not see a reason for this change and even cannot imagine it.

Thus the foregoing considerations seem, to lead to the conclusion that Heal's 'moderate' semantic holism is not really different from the semantic holism criticized by Fodor, at least as far as its inability to avoid the preposterous consequence that any difference in the views of two individuals makes their concepts and beliefs totally different.

But at this point someone might contend that these criticisms appear successful because they are based on an oversimplified account of Heal's holism. The crucial component of that account is a conception of language as an integral part of a specific way of living, as constituted by a form of life.[14] And it is this dimension of the holism in question that makes it really moderate, and hence it is able to block the preposterous consequence pointed out by Fodor.

However even granting that this is indeed so, one should notice that such holism 'imports' philosophical claims that are hard to justify given the perspective of quietist realism. To put it differently, it creates serious problems with the self-justification of quietism. To see these problems clearly consider the following passage from Heal's book :

> But right across the board we need to be coaxed out of the impulse to metaphysical speculation, to be persuaded that we can and should be content with that understanding of our concepts which comes from seeing how judgements using them are placed in a context of actions, interest and other judgements, so that together they constitute the only sort of life that we have any idea how to live.[15]

It seems to follow from this that we are to be 'coaxed out of the impulse to metaphysical speculation' (i.e., from mirroring realism or pragmatism) by a particular understanding of ourselves and our activities. We may say then that to justify realism we need some kind of philosophical anthropology.

In fact, this anthropology is in this case quite determinate, and it is not, contrary to appearances, merely a set of philosophically innocent common places. Its central idea is the Wittgensteinian image of a human being who is bound by various kinds of not easily separable relationships with other human beings and the world. In particular, his or her knowledge is inextricably connected with action, and is the result not merely of grasping what is objectively out there, but

also his or her way of life. Knowledge changes our way of life, but also our way of life has a great impact on the content of our knowledge. We cannot even say what it would be like for us to live a different life. In general, it is a vision of a human being more as an agent than a spectator, whose life is not to be explained in terms of separate faculties (theoretical reason, practical reason, etc.)

But now the question arises how we have obtained such insights about ourselves. In the passage quoted above Heal speaks about *seeing* how judgements are placed in a context of actions, interests, and other judgements. We have been told earlier also that we should 'become aware of the interlocking complexities of our thought and action'. But what is the mechanism of this seeing and how are we *becoming aware* of all these facts about us, without presupposing mirroring realism ? To put it more generally: is it possible to justify quietist realism without inconsistency, e.g. without making use of mirroring realism ?

There are at least two possible answers to this question. The first is based on the idea of the naturalness of quietist realism. We can refer here to Wittgenstein's idea of assembling reminders and to the following passage from *Philosophical Investigations:*

> What we are supplying are really remarks on the natural history of human beings; we are not contributing curiosities, however, but observations which no one has doubted, but which have escaped regard only because they are always before our eyes. (I,415)

But if we assume the existence of such obvious, almost self-presenting facts, which are not noticed only owing to a radical distortion of our perspective, we must at the same time acknowledge that at least some parts of reality, namely we ourselves, are self-presenting that is given to us in the way postulated by mirroring realism. This is a consequence of the fact that, according to quietist realism, the idea of knowing subject(s) standing in a special congnitive relation to external reality is a myth. There are only human beings or persons who are complex objects in the world and whose knowledge processes are interwoven with and modified by other activities. So if we take this for granted, the obvious and self-presenting facts about us are in an unambiguous sense obvious and self-presenting facts about a part of the world.

Because this appeal to the idea of naturalness seems to lead inevitably to inconsistency or making a concession to the mirroring realist, one can attempt to give the idea of naturalness a historicist shift, and to argue in the following way: the general image presupposed by the quietist realist is a part of the general worldview hidden behind almost all contemporary philosophies.[16] It is unlikely then that this worldview, at which we arrived after a very long course of history could be false. But to strengthen this conclusion we must add that it is impossible to imagine or even comprehend the possibility of more adequate world view. This additional claim is at odds with the quietist realist's view on possibilities, however. Concepts, categories and distinctions do not come isolated. They are only understandable in their proper setting. The same applies, says Heal - following Wittgenstein - to the notion of possibility :

> And the fact is that we are not trained in, we have in our loves no role for, assessing the possibility of every kind of conceptual combination. We talk of possibility in a variety of contexts - some having to do with derivations in formal systems, some with whether men can swim rivers, pegs fit into holes or diamonds are to be found in boxes. In these contexts we know what to do with the notion of possibility - how to go about establishing whether or not something is possible and what accepting the judgement might lead to.[17]

Consequently, what possibilities are open in the area of the general views of the world depends on our present perspective and interests. Any changes in the latter will influence the range of possibilities.

If the remarks above are right, it seems that we are forced to the second answer to the question how to justify quietist realism without inconsistency. Any justification of quietist realism must satisfy quietist principles. In this case one can certainly be consistent and there is no need to impose any external limitations on quietism. One can even praise this a virtue of quietist realism by arguing in the following way : a comprehensive view is in trouble if its self-application cannot coherently be carried through. For instance, one of the trouble if its self- application cannot coherently be carried through. For instance, one of the important requirements for any general view about meaning and truth is the condition that such a view must be self-applicable, on pain of undermining itself.

The same goes for quietist realism which is obviously a general comprehensive view. But such an answer has its own difficulties.

On the first sight such a solution appears to beg the question: it simply presupposes what it has to justify. It is almost like saying: there is no question of justifying quietist realism, provided that we accept the quietist view on the nature of justification. But even if a convincing case can be made that this is not so, that transference of quietist relism from a substantial level to meta-level shows only how all-embracing and unavoidable is this perspective, one has still to deal with the problem how to support the philosophical anthropology embedded in quietist realism which is also transferred to the meta-level.

At this stage of the argument, in order to remove the threat of *regressus ad infinitum,* one can again refer to idle attempts to reach an Olympian standpoint on God's eye view. Wittgenstein's considerations about the limits of justification can also be invoked here. But due to these limitations and reservations quietist relism begins to lose its attractiveness. For many it is not a full-blooded philosophical theory that aims to explain and justify our realist practices, and cannot stand on a par with mirroring realism and pragmatism. It is just a not very well motivated resignation from taking part in the debate, resignation which has no explanatory force. One may even be tempted to say that it is simply and expression of philosophical despair.

These difficulties and the shaky status of that what can be called here the metaphilosophy of quietist realism, were felt by the later Wittgenstein who still oscillated in his philosophy between a transcendental and an anthropological stance.[18] For someone, as Heal, who wants to build more systematic philosophical view on Wittgenstein's insights, there is an urgent question to be solved concerning which of these two stances should prevail on the metaphilosophical level.

However be that as it may, one can plausibly argue that all these troubles suggest that quietist realism is not actually a stable and satisfactory intermediate position between mirroring realism and pragmatism, or to put it more generally a view that transcends both realist and anti-realist standpoints, as well as their shortcomings. If one systematically unpacks the consequences that were always embedded in a particular form of life which forces us to use certain concepts in making judgements about the world, then it tends to slide into a form of anti-

realism. And its apparent attractiveness comes mostly from the fact that it is contrasted by Heal with very unattractive alternative, especially with mirroring realism which, as she holds, "goes naturally together with the idea of a given totality of metaphysical possibilities or ways that things might be.[19] Contrary to that it seems plausible that the link of full-blooded realism with this idea is merely a casual one, and that there are viable forms of realism which do not accept it. But this is a separate issue and it requires a separate paper.[20]

NOTES

1.   Heal (1989). For another similar attempt see Diamond (1991)

2.   Heal (1989), p. 16

3.   *Ibid.*, p. 19

4.   This term is, of course, an echo of the famous book of R. Rorty's (1979)

5   Heal (1989), p. 24. She seems to distinguish here sharply between sup-posed weak or uncontroversial independence (episitemological) which forms part of minimal realism, and controversial or strong independence (concept-ual) which is distinctive to mirroring realism. But it is not at all clear how it is possible to secure epistemological independence without any form of conceptual independence, especially when the former is so conceived that it is really a form of ontological independence, in as much as at amounts,roughly, to the following claim: the fact that a person S thinks that p is one thing, and that p is the case is another. This, of course, by itself does not show that mirroring realism is true, i.e., that the world must come pre-sliced, or must bring with it the categories in which it is properly to be described, but at least it puts into doubt the possibility of non-committal construal of minimal realism, the construal that is not biased towards fullblooded realism or antirealism. It looks like epistemological, ontological and conceptual independence are more deeply connected than Heal is willing to admit.

6.   *Ibid.*, p. 123

7.   *Ibid.*, p.24

8. *Ibid.*, 177

9. This is a description of quietism taken from C. Wright (1992), p. 202.

10. Heal (1989), p. 225

11. *Ibid.*, p.87.

12. Heal refers to Fodor's account of holism in his (1987). For a more recent and detailed ritical discussion of holism see his book written with E. Lepore (1992). Heal (1993/ 4) is a response to the anti-holistic arguments of this book.

13. Heal (1989), p.91.

14. Such a view is dubbed by Fodor and Lepore (1992) an *anthropological* holism; they formulate its main thesis in the following way: "there is an internal connection between being *a symbol* and playing a role in a system of *non*linguistic conventions, practices, rituals, and performances - an internal connection, as one says, between symbols and Forms of Life" (p.6).

15. Heal (1989),p. 215

16. This worldview (of human beings as predominantly agents) is described and contrasted with the former medieval and modern worldview by E. Craig (1987).

17. Heal (1989),p. 225

18. As excellently shown by J. Lear (1986).

19. Heal (1989), p. 220

20. I am very grateful to Bill Brewer, Edward Craig and Hohn Heil for reading a draft of this paper and making useful comments. I have also profited from critical notes sent to me by Jane Heal, in spite of the fact that I have finally decided to stick to my guns.

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