

THE NEO-REALISTIC THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

BRO. ALEXIUS M. DRISCOLL, O. P.



RISTOTLE tells us that "He who considers things in their growth and origin will obtain the clearest view of them." Consequently, it will aid our understanding of New Realism if we first consider its genesis and then study the system in itself. In this paper we shall limit our investigation to the theory of knowledge, fundamentally the most important aspect of the system. For, "The New Realism is primarily a doctrine concerning the relation between the knowing process and the thing known."¹

It is said that the world lives in the enjoyment of opposites, and it would seem from a perusal of philosophy's history that no exception is made in the domain of thought. Comes New Realism to substantiate the fact, for it is a reaction against Subjectivism. Our purpose, then, is twofold: first, to state the tenets of Idealism against which New Realism is a polemic, and secondly to consider the Neo-Realistic theory of knowledge in itself.

René Descartes is the father of modern philosophy and in the Cartesian system we find the basic principle of our study, *viz.* there is and can be no interaction between the soul and body. The essence of the soul consists in thought, the essence of matter consists in extension and between the two there is no reciprocal influence. The pineal gland theory, whereby Descartes sought to bridge the chasm, was recognized by those who followed the French Philosopher for what it was—a begging of the question. John Locke accepted the doctrine of segregation without reservation. When applied to the theory of knowledge what follows? In our cognitive acts we apprehend, not extra-mental reality, but rather *ideas*. For the Scholastic an idea is the means *by which* an object is known and it is not itself the object of the mind. It is the table we apprehend and not the idea of the table which terminates our cognition. For Locke the opposite is true—we know only our concepts or mental states. Berkeley advanced a step farther and maintained that the very existence of an object depends upon its being known. Descartes and Locke did not deny the existence of material substances but accepted them as postulates nec-

¹ Holt and Others, *New Realism*, p. 2.

essary to explain the presence of ideas in the mind. Berkeley accepted only spiritual substances, denying the necessity of positing the material. These doctrines in the hands of Hume developed into absolute Scepticism and Humean tenets soon reached Germany and Kant. The German's theory of knowledge was a partial reaction against the position taken by Hume, and again we find a reverting to the stress of the subjective. "Our perception of phenomena does not depend on the phenomena perceived, but rather on the *a priori* sense-forms which make possible all empirical knowledge. Hence it follows that all the knowledge which Kant allows as possible to us—a knowledge of phenomena—is entirely subjective, dependent on forms innate in the mind anterior to all experience."²

It is needless to follow the ramifications of the doctrines of these men as seen in the philosophies of their followers. In the various philosophical camps we find an emphasizing of the subjective, a disregard for the objective and the assumption that extra-mental reality depends upon thought for its existence. The influence of these subjectivistic doctrines, in that New Realism is a reaction against them, is seen in the position taken by the protagonists of that school. What then is the Neo-Realistic theory of knowledge?

The New Realist condemns Naïve Realism because the latter fails to account for the phenomena of dreams, illusion and error. He rejects the Hypothetical Dualism of Descartes together with Subjectivism because these philosophies seem to account for little else than error and illusion, and, moreover, their theory of Representative Perception is untenable. For, says the New Realist, the representative theory gives us only "shapeless representations of shape, motionless representations of motion, colourless representations of colour and odourless representations of odour."³ In other words, the idea cannot reasonably be accepted as the terminus of our cognition. New Realists are, then, protagonists of Presentative Perception; they are Natural Dualists. That is, they maintain that the knowledge subject immediately apprehends the object-world, the existence of which is independent of the percipient agent.⁴

Now the knowledge problem embraces three elements—a knowing subject, an object known and a process by which the object is known. What is the Neo-Realistic doctrine in relation to the sub-

² C. Callan, O. P., *Examination of Kant's Fundamental Teachings*, Reprint from *Catholic University Bulletin*, XVII (1911) No. 8, 739.

³ E. Holt, *Concept of Consciousness*, p. 142.

⁴ For a treatment of external perception see M. Maher, S. J., *Psychology*, (New York, 1925), p. 98ff.

ject knowing? The most essential tenet in regard to this portion of the epistemological triangle is the denial of the soul. The Scholastic doctrine holds for interaction between the body and spiritual principle; Descartes isolates them; the spiritualistic Idealist denies the existence of matter; the New Realist in reaction applies the Occamite razor and gives us a soulless man. This monstrosity is not a substance, for there are no substances in the accepted interpretation of the term. Man is dubbed with the rather questionable title of "quality group"—literally he is an accident. Here we see a reaction against Idealism—a stressing of the objective material as opposed to the subjective spiritual. The New Realist speaks of mind and consciousness. What does he mean since he denies the existence of a spiritual principle in man? Strangely enough, the consideration of this question pertains to our treatment of the object known rather than to the subject knowing, and this because of New Realism's novel theory of knowledge.

On the part of the object, one of the essential tenets of New Realism is that a thing may be, and may be known; that is, reality does not depend upon thought. This doctrine they oppose to that of Idealism which maintains that all things *are* known; all things depend upon knowledge for their existence; reality *is* thought. Another fundamental question emerges. What is the Neo-Realistic explanation of mind, consciousness, ideas? In his theory of knowledge the New Realist will admit, we might say theoretically, three elements that go to make up knowledge. That is, he will admit of a physical organism—which is all that remains of man after a denial of the soul—an object to which this organism responds and a knowledge process. We inquire as to the location of mind, consciousness, ideas. We are told that "Consciousness is a cross-section of the universe," that is, the sum total of objects which are brought into relation with the subject. In other words, when the physical organism responds to the group of objects which constitute its environment, this group or manifold, insofar as it has been responded to by the nervous system, constitutes consciousness, and the individual objects are our sensations, perceptions and ideas.⁵ Hence our idea and the object are identical. The table known and the idea of the table are one. Is this a canon of New Realism? Professor Holt replies: "There are no such two things as knowledge and the object of knowledge, or thought and the things thought of."⁶ And the following quotation from

⁵ Sr. M. Verda, *New Realism*, (New York, 1926), p. 148. This excellent work has been of great assistance in the composition of the present paper.

⁶ E. Holt, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

William James, he asserts, is to be interpreted literally: "Our experience presents no such duplicity as the content of knowledge in contrast with its object; the content is the object."⁷ Again the contra-subjective complex asserts itself. The New Realist is endeavoring to save the existence of a spatio-temporal universe as independent of thought. But the desire to oust Subjectivism leads to the formation of a process of knowledge in which the objective predominates. The result is identification, where there should be relation, between thought and its object, and New Realism has made another tonsorial gesture no less worthy of Occam.

There remains New Realism's interpretation of the knowing process. This process, as we have observed, consists in the specific response of the nervous organism to an extra-mental object. Professor Montague writes that in "perceiving remembering, imagining and reacting, it (the nervous system) is respectively ingesting, digesting, reproducing and excreting those free energies dissociated from matter which in the form of vibrations of various kinds have proceeded from distant objects through the sensory channels to the brain, where they constitute by their implications a consciousness of those objects and make possible an intelligent and purposive adjustment to an environment extending in time and space."⁸

Thus far we have briefly considered the genesis of New Realism, the doctrines of Idealism against which the New Realism is a polemic, and the Neo-Realistic explanation of the knowledge problem. What criticism, constructive or destructive, has the Scholastic to offer? Being himself a Natural Dualist and a defender of immediate perception, that is, holding as he does for the existence of an independent spatio-temporal universe which is known immediately, the Scholastic naturally agrees with the New Realist on these points. As a polemic against Subjectivism the system is a step in the right direction; this role alone, however, does not make necessary the formation of a new philosophy. It is our opinion that the New Realism has little of the new in its constructive doctrines and that for the most part what is novel or original in the system, is also rather unintelligible. New Realism presents itself as being fundamentally a philosophy of the knowledge problem. What new doctrines has it given the world of thought in relation to the three constitutive elements of knowledge? The New Realist tells us that the knowing subject has no soul or

⁷ W. James, "Does Consciousness Exist?" *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Vol. I pp. 478ff.

⁸ Holt and Others, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

anything of the spiritual in his make-up—Materialism is rather old. The knowing agent is not a substance—the Phenomenalism of Hume *admitted* this fact. The knowing agent suffers a physical modification as a result of his contact with the object-world—a doctrine as ancient as the knowledge problem. The object known exists independently of its being known—the *Philosophia Perennis* has maintained this for the past few centuries.

It might be objected that the New Realists may, if they wish, embrace an Eclecticism; that their tenets *in toto* constitute a new and valid system; that their doctrines which are similar to those of other philosophies are arrived at by different approaches and for different reasons. Conceding that this may be true, there are difficulties to be found in their tenets which are more immediately concerned with the knowledge problem and, we recall, New Realism is fundamentally and primarily a system devoted to the solution of this question. Moreover its materialistic doctrines involve the New Realism in several embarrassing implications.

Again the New Realist tells us that the object of thought and the thought of an object are one. Here we find something original but not very intelligible. New Realism holds that the object remains unchanged when known. It teaches that thought or an idea is an object considered insofar as it is known or specifically responded to by a percipient agent. Assuredly this is tantamount to saying that an object *becomes* thought when the agent reacts. But how can an object become something and yet remain unchanged? The mutation is not on the part of the agent because thought for the New Realist is not "in the skull," but "out there"—it *is* the object. The object was not always thought because it exists independently of thought. Or, we may place the difficulty in this manner: Either the object is an idea or it is not. If it is not, then knowledge in the Neo-Realistic system is impossible. If it is, one of two things is true: the object was always thought or it becomes thought. The New Realist will not accept the first hypothesis and consequently he must admit the latter. The New Realist might contend that this becoming is merely a question of relation—the object unknown has no relation to the agent; the object known has relation to the knower, or rather, is related. If this be true it seems that knowledge is reduced to a relation; but we maintain that although relation enters into knowledge it does not constitute it.

There is another doctrine of New Realism which to us, at least, is not clear. Even the New Realist will admit that man is not so objective to himself that his brain is "out there." How then explain

the above quotation given in interpretation of our knowing process? In it we read that the wave energies in the form of vibrations proceed from the object to the brain *where* they constitute consciousness. But we understand that consciousness is "out there;" that it is, under the given conditions, identical with the manifold of objects constituting one's environment.

In their work, *New Realism*, the Neo-Realists after admitting the rather undeveloped stage of their system, conclude: "Nevertheless the foundations and the scaffolding of the realistic universe are already built; and it is even possible for some to live in it and feel at home." We must admit that we are not among the "some." Idealism identifying matter and spirit brings the object, such as it is, "into the skull." New Realists "present to the philosophic world a pseudo-explanation of the knowing process, and reveal themselves to be intellectual rovers in the field of innovation."⁹ They have been too enthusiastic and their spirit of reaction has carried them too far on the road which leads from the subjective element in knowledge.

⁹ Sr. M. Verda, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

ET VERBUM CARO FACTUM EST

BRO. NICHOLAS WALSH, O. P.

A council is held in eternity,
And lo, the inscrutable plan!
Immaculate Mary is Mother of God,
And Infinite God is Man.