

John Foster

A World For Us: The Case for Phenomenalistic Idealism
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This book is, in some respects, a reworking of Foster's earlier work *The Case for Idealism* (1982). Back in 1990, while at graduate school, I bought a copy of the latter, but its impenetrable prose threw me off and it has languished on my shelf unread, ever since. Fichte was an easier read. Foster's latest defense of Berkeleyan-style idealism is, however, a much kinder and more accessible work for the reader. His prose is clear and to the point. The argument is streamlined, avoiding some of the more technical expressions and distinctions found in the earlier defense. This is a readable piece of admittedly difficult philosophy. In a time when metaphysics indulges in 'excesses' that positivists and naturalists warned us of—consider the debate over David K. Lewis' concrete possible worlds—it is only to be expected that idealism would attempt a return. This is not to be taken as a criticism. Really, it is delightful to be challenged by a contemporary, card-carrying idealist.

Foster covers a lot of ground in this new defense, although the spirit of many of the arguments will be familiar to students of idealism. He begins with a discussion of perception and the epistemology of the external, physical world. He finds realist theories of perception to be inadequate and our knowledge of the external physical world limited to its causal dispositional features. The intrinsic nature of the physical must elude us, he concludes, if we are realists. In Chapter 3 Foster distinguishes realism and idealism, and in Chapter 4 he launches into his attack on realism. The last two chapters (5 and 6) cover problems with the interpretation and defense of idealism: can we really say that there is an external world, or should we say, having found that our hands and feet aren't physical, that we live in an illusory or 'virtual' world? Foster wields under-determination arguments against the realist and hence needs to show that no such under-determination exists in our evidence for choosing idealism over illusionism.

The overall strategy will be familiar: begin with epistemological worries regarding the physical world and work towards a contradiction in physicalism, based on epistemological principles. So, in Chapter 1, Foster reviews two mutually exclusive and exhaustive approaches to perception. He calls these the fundamentalist and decompositionalist theories of perception. On the more familiar decompositionalist account, the perception of an object decomposes into a psychological state that is not itself perceptive and further external facts such as a causal relation to an object. On the fundamentalist view, perception does not decompose into two separate states; the psychological state alone is taken to be perceptive, as we might expect from a direct realist account. Foster's discussion is nuanced, having been derived from his earlier book-

length discussion of perception. He argues that neither view is satisfactory, remarking on the decompositionalist that he or she ‘wants to say that, in combination, the occurrence of the visual experience, the qualitative fit between its content and the relevant physical item, and the causal role of this item in producing the experience suffice to make it true that Ralph sees the item. But given our actual concept of seeing, it is hard to understand what would warrant this conclusion...[What] we have here, surely, is not an awareness of an external item, but only an experience which...provides its subject with some kind of representation of...an external item’ (31).

In Chapter 2 Foster attacks the epistemic accessibility of the physical, arguing that at best all we can know of the physical is its dispositional features, i.e. how matter is disposed to appear to human sensibility. But the intrinsic nature of the physical must be elusive. Thus materialist realism would make its very subject matter inaccessible to human inquiry.

The realist claim that the external world is logically independent of mental facts—call this the ‘independence’ thesis or claim—has always bothered idealists. Foster thinks that if independence is true then it is possible that external space is nothing like it appears to us and thus might never reveal its true structure. If that is a genuine possibility, could it be given a realist physicalist interpretation? If not, then realism is self-contradictory. Foster argues that such possibilities aren’t captured by the concept of space available to the agent. If the realist postulates a spatial world that has no possible epistemic relation to the concept found in experience, then there is no reason to subsume this world under the concept of space as found in experience. Thus it appears that independence undercuts the legitimacy of applying physical concepts derived from experience. Therefore, if realism is true, perception becomes mysterious and the intrinsic nature of the physical is inaccessible to human thought. But worse, realism is self-contradictory: it cannot coherently accommodate independence while maintaining the applicability of our physical concepts.

How might we reply to these arguments? First, idealists are often accused of solipsism, and one might wonder about such an attack given Foster’s odd habit of ignoring much of the recent literature. Foster’s discussion of the inscrutability of physical content could have benefited a great deal from a survey of the debate over dispositional essentialism. Sydney Shoemaker’s work has particular relevance here. A dispositional essentialist might claim that there is no legitimate distinction between categorical and dispositional ‘content’ of a property, thus blocking the argument to inscrutability. Physical property identity is exhausted by causal dispositions, thus there is no elusive intrinsic content to such properties that realism finds inaccessible.

Foster’s discussion of perception is that of a considered expert. But regarding the decompositionalist view he remarks,

It is hard to think of the item as thereby becoming something which the subject genuinely sees - something of which he is genuinely aware. What we have here, surely, is not an awareness of an external item, but only an experience which, by its causal origins, provides its subject with a representation of, or with information about, an external item (31).

I must admit, I couldn't feel any cognitive dissonance on entertaining the decompositionalist view. I couldn't quite see why the admission of a representation in the process of perception constituted a veil incompatible with genuine perception. I admit that I can't quite see the difference between saying "I have (visual) information about A" and "I see A". I suspect that a compositional fallacy is being invoked in order to invoke our intuitions against decompositionalist analyses. Two non-perceptive items, the mental state and the causal relation, can make up a perception, just as much as non-dog atoms can make up a dog. Having an image of an apple caused in me by an apple seems like a paradigm case of perception—even though I suppose my concept of perception is not as perspicacious as Foster's.

Finally, the physical epistemic possibility that the physical may turn out to be very different from what is given in our concept of space as experienced, is supposed to provide a problem for the application of our concept of the physical. But if we do hold to a decompositionalist view of perception, then we can separate the content of a perceptual state from its cause. That this causal chain occurs rather than another allows us to apply the concept of the physical, even when we do not know whether there is any isomorphism between content and cause. It allows us to say: space—the cause of our perception of space—is nothing like how space is represented in our perception. And finally, there is the 'functional' view of matter, once advocated by Santayana, which is that the physical is whatever plays a certain role in our philosophy as the cause of perception, the field of action, etc. Anything that plays such roles is physical, for whatever further intrinsic determinations one wishes to allow. Thus, the physical may turn out to be very different from the hard, dry, shaped, lifeless stuff found in experience, but that itself wouldn't be, as if these were mutually exclusive concepts, any argument for the ideal nature of the cause of experience.

Good philosophy makes us question our assumptions. Foster's book is worth reading for this reason. His arguments are challenging, but the biggest fault with his book is its failure to address his audience of experts. The result is that, like absolute idealism itself, the arguments may strike the reader as anachronistic and ultimately unpersuasive.

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