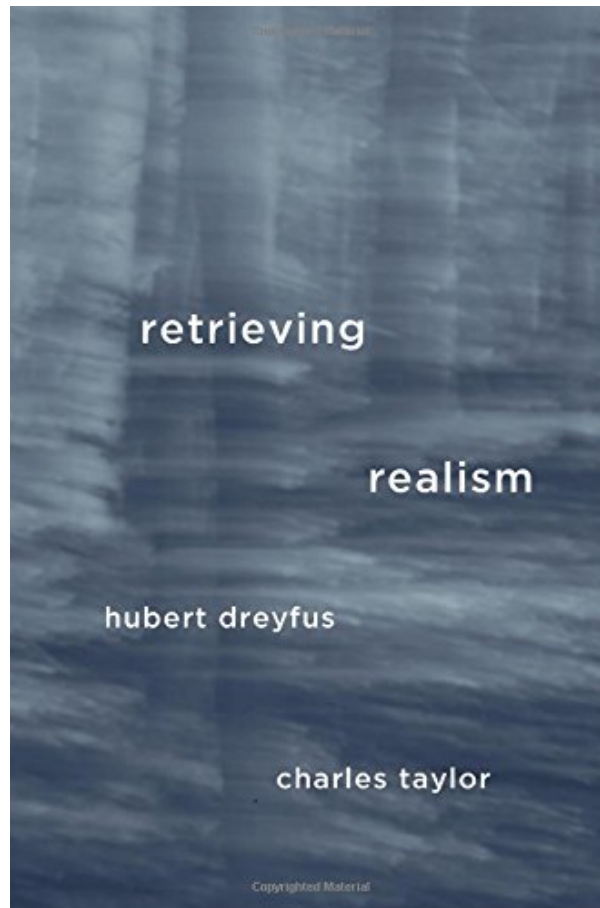
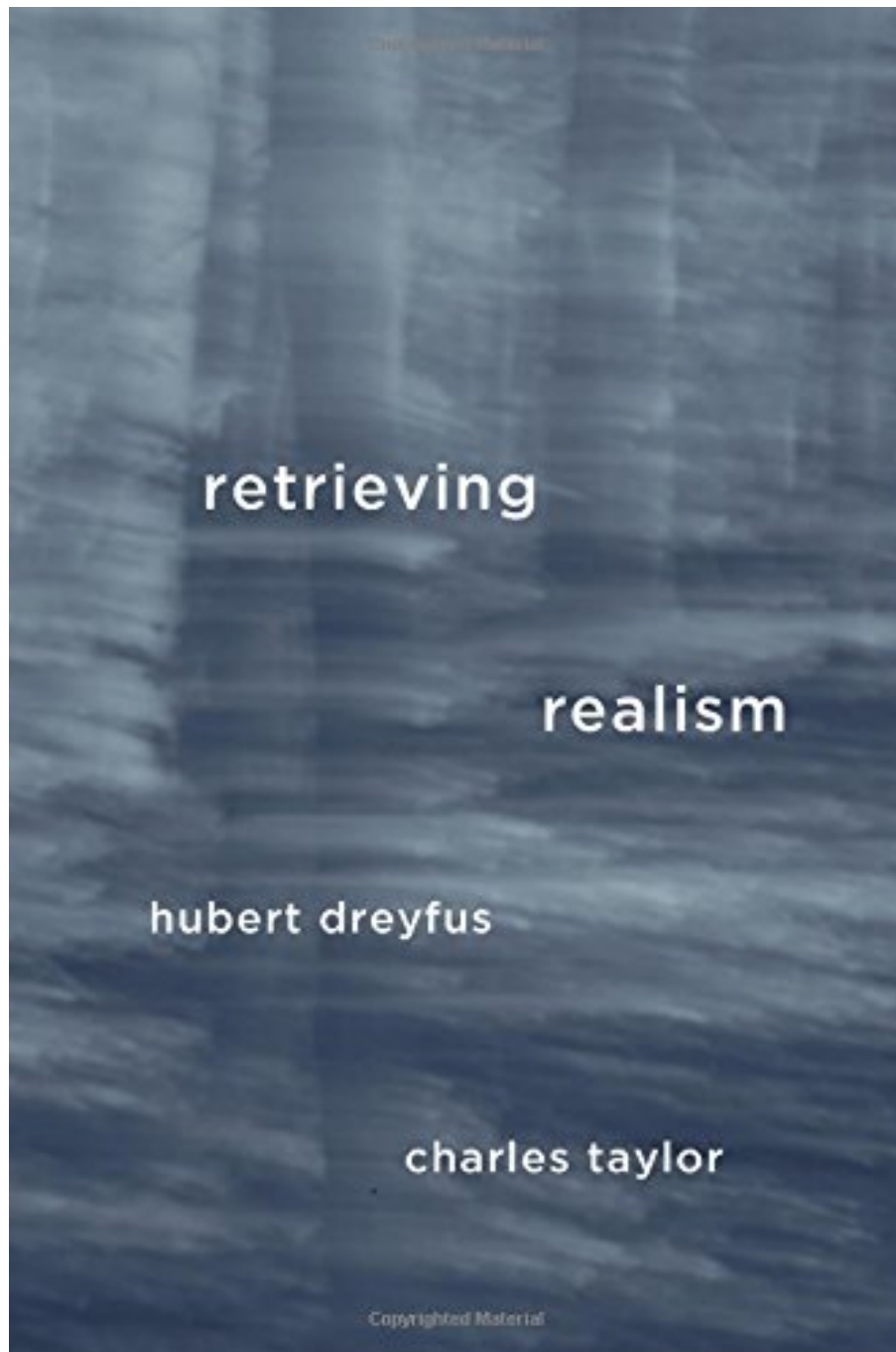


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“A picture held us captive,” writes Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, describing the powerful image of mind that underlies the modern epistemological tradition from Descartes onward. *Retrieving Realism* offers a radical critique of the Cartesian epistemic picture that has captivated philosophy for too long and restores a realist view affirming our direct access to the everyday world and to the physical universe.

According to Descartes, knowledge exists in the form of ideas in the mind that purportedly represent the world. This “mediational” epistemology—internal ideas mediating external reality—continues to exert a grip on Western thought, and even philosophers such as Quine, Rorty, and Davidson who have claimed to refute Descartes remain imprisoned within its regime. As Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor show, knowledge consists of much more than the explicit representations we formulate. We gain knowledge of the world through bodily engagement with it—by handling things, moving among them, responding to them—and these forms of knowing cannot be understood in mediational terms. Dreyfus and Taylor also contest Descartes’s privileging of the individual mind, arguing that much of our understanding of the world is necessarily shared.

Once we deconstruct Cartesian mediationalism, the problems that Hume, Kant, and many of our contemporaries still struggle with—trying to prove the existence of objects beyond our representations—fall away, as does the motivation for nonrealist doctrines. We can then begin to describe the background everyday world we are absorbed in and the universe of natural kinds discovered by science.

- Sales Rank: #453558 in Books
- Published on: 2015-06-11
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.50" h x .80" w x 6.30" l, .0 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 184 pages

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Knowledge and Realism without Representation

By Doctor Moss

Dreyfus and Taylor present a unique solution to the problems of knowledge and realism, “retrieving” both from a skepticism that seems inherent and inescapable in traditional western philosophy.

There are two big arguments in the book. The first is an epistemological argument and attacks what the authors call “mediational” theories of knowledge — ones in which our access to reality is in one way or another “mediated” rather than direct. The second is a metaphysical argument that takes a non-mediated,

direct account of access to and knowledge of the world farther, to a “realist” claim about the status of our knowledge with respect to a world independent of our involvement in it or our making sense of it.

The anti-mediational argument is relatively familiar. Dreyfus and Taylor characterize “mediational” accounts of knowledge as adhering to four characteristics: (1) that our knowledge of reality outside us is obtained “only through” some features (ideas, representations, percepts) within us, (2) that our knowledge of external reality can be decomposed into some sort of discrete elements (e.g., ideas, beliefs, sentences), (3) that justifying those elements of knowledge cannot rely on anything outside of them — e.g., that beliefs only follow from other beliefs — that there is no transcendent Archimedean point from which to justify the system of beliefs or representations per se, and (4) a “dualist sorting” or, for short, the distinction between mind and reality (where “mind” needn’t be individual, but could refer to the theoretical knowledge or socially generated ideas of a community). The most familiar “mediational” accounts are representationalist, although Dreyfus and Taylor mean to generalize the view they oppose as “mediationalism” to encompass a broader scope of views.

They then draw on Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty to construct an alternative account in which our relationship to the world is pointedly unmediated. It is through our bodily orientation that we come to experience the world — our touching, gripping, and reaching, our orientation in up, down, near, far, our involvement in practical tasks . . . These are the ways in which we first or “primordially” come to terms with the world, not through observation at a distance and construction of representations or theories.

Their opponent here is a “picture,” in Wittgenstein’s sense of a picture that holds us captive. Once we escape this picture of the knower as observer and theorizer, the picture that has long dominated western philosophy, the involved, embedded knower can emerge.

So long as knowledge of the world is “mediated”, i.e., so long as we only know of the world through some intermediate (ideas, representations, etc.), the question of skepticism can arise. Do those intermediates provide us with reliable access? How could we know, since we have no independent way of checking their reliability in toto? This is the strength of Cartesian skepticism.

Eliminate the intermediary, and you disarm the skeptic. We know the world because we are already in it. There just is no separation, no mediation, to feed the skeptic’s doubt.

The response to skepticism then is not so much a solution as a dissolving, again in a Wittgensteinian sense. The skeptic cannot get his argument off the ground, because that separation, the question of how the “internal” (the idea, belief, representation, etc.) relates to the “external” (the world in itself) never arises in the first place.

Given that dissolution, the traditional philosopher may still ask, what of our theories, beliefs, ideas, representations? What is the status of the world they give us access to? Is it the world of traditional realists, or idealists, or something in-between? Kantian epistemology, for example, upheld knowledge but not realism, at least in the traditional metaphysical sense.

This is where the second argument of the book kicks in. Dreyfus and Taylor stake a “realist” claim. Roughly, their argument is that, beginning with our direct access to the world, our scientific undertaking, i.e., our investigation into what accounts for the behavior of the world we directly interact with, is a valid investigation into the world as it is in itself. In our direct interactions, we meet resistance from the world. The world has an independence against our will and understanding — objects in it are too hard, too soft, too distant, etc. And we seek an account of that resistance or independence. This is science, or at least

protoscience.

The real crux of the argument comes in Chapter Seven, where Dreyfus and Taylor distinguish “deflationary realism” from “robust realism”. Deflationary realism is where we seem to end up when we admit that the world we live in is co-produced by us, providing sense and intelligibility, and “the world itself”. That “world itself” is never, according to this deflationary realism, available to us in its pristine, unalloyed state, only via our ways of making it intelligible. And in fact Dreyfus and Taylor seemed to be headed toward such a “deflationary realism” in their account of the world as we know it as a product of our interaction with it — a “co-production”.

If Dreyfus and Taylor stopped at deflationary realism, they would have still made a valuable contribution, in insisting that the ways in which we make the world intelligible are primarily bodily — via interaction-laden, orienting projects, movements and positions such as up, down, near, far, heavy to the hand, etc. This is in opposition to the, to my mind, Kantian notion of intelligibility that is intellectual and observer-driven.

But Dreyfus and Taylor want to claim “robust realism” — which in their terms reclaims a sense of truth as correspondence to an independently existing reality — the very terms of traditional realist epistemology that have been under attack.

They claim that in fact it is this “independence” of reality that scientific theories are capturing, in accounting for the resistance that we meet — the very fact that, while how we perceive and act may be up to us, but what we perceive and what we act with or against is not. Science gives us exactly an account of those very qualities of hardness, nearness, distance, etc. — the independence of reality that we meet in our direct access to it.

It’s important to see that these two big arguments — the epistemological and the metaphysical — are linked. Otherwise, a Cartesian response to “robust realism” would simply call classical doubts into play — dream or deceiver arguments. But those arguments themselves presume a lack of direct access. Skeptical arguments depend upon a problematic relationship between beliefs, theories, ideas, representations, etc. on one side (the “internal” for Dreyfus and Taylor) and reality itself on the other (the “external”). But, if Dreyfus and Taylor have been successful in their first big argument, that problematic relationship never is able to get off the ground.

I have to admit reticence to accept their conclusions. As Dreyfus and Taylor conceive science, it is the result of a Heideggerian “deworlding” — an abstraction from the context of everyday life in which direct access is grounded. I haven’t yet seen the argument that this abstraction isn’t also a distortion of that direct access — a withdrawing into abstraction and an explicit construction of “theory”. Explicit beliefs, statements, even representations are the lifeblood of science — in the abstraction and withdrawal that generate them, is there room again for the skeptic’s distinction between world and account to grow? More to think about.

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How can this be?

By William S Jamison

This is a surprising turn of events. The author of *Sources of the Self* and *A Secular Age* seems to be moving more towards a Husserlian point of view - Back to the Things Themselves! How can this be? At first I was worried Dreyfus kidnaped Taylor and took him off to the Laurentian Mountains. But the book is serious. It reminds me of Philip Kitcher's book from the 80s on mathematical knowledge. That book presented a theory of mathematics that argued our abilities in math come from perception leading to elementary mathematical knowledge on which is built the edifice of further theory. As I read this book it reminded me of this

argument. Another is Seeing Things as They Are by John Searle (which I have just barely begun) that both strike me as trying to do something similar. That is they are trying to do an end run around what Taylor refers to as the mediational theory that basically cuts knowledge off from reality – or rather, from the possibility that we could have certainty regarding the world apart from our perceptions. Of course, even that summary is mistaken since the issue is more complex than that. Or what might be called disjunctivism (but which Searle calls Conceptual Dualism) as I understand it in Searle's argument and Searle says "Austin refuted the argument from illusion." – which argument is a major step here. But regarding Philip Kitcher's attempt in the Nature of Mathematical Knowledge we have what may be the most certain type of knowledge being puzzled out regarding the source of that sense of certainty. Recalling Wittgenstein's statement that the type of certainty one has is a result of the type of language game one is using – we can think of mathematics as the most rigorous language game and so our sense of certainty (a different category than knowledge granted) is greatest in mathematics. But how do we get it? Do we perceive numbers? But this whole project strikes me as suspicious. Haven't we been convinced that Western Philosophy has been a history of progress? The progress was partially because of the correct step that we are now contemplating reversing in order to retrieve realism? But here we can see the effort by Taylor and Dreyfus who deal adequately I think with the puzzles even if the results are not conclusive.

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disappointing

By Amazon Customer

to be honest i was disapointed with the book, i expected more. im a big fan of hubert dreyfus, and this was a let down. i am a layman and not really intrested in how to write philosophy and overcome the mistakes daescartes and others have made when writing philosophy. for a general person looking to be enlightened or find some meaning this is not the book for you, it is an accademic book for philosphy students or similiar specialised areas to study. i would get a refund on this item if i could

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