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## ARTFUL REALISM

Naive realism is the experience of reality as an immediacy contained within appearances, as experienced, for example, in the extraordinary achievements of "ordinary" visual perception. It is the experience of a relationship between inside and outside, so proportionate, coincidental and graceful that no difference is noticed between the real and the apparent, and no disharmony felt between the nature of an object or stimulus and the nature of our response to it or representation of it.

Naive realism is a highly addictive experience, for reality-seeking human beings; once they have had it they cannot keep off it. "Ordinary" perception is to the eye as nirvana is to the mind, and what they have in common is the experience of reality as transparent, inherently compelling, and indistinguishable from experience.

It is probably a good thing that, in reality, the real and the apparent are not conflated, and that, when it comes to appearances, reality is not *that* immediate or close at hand. Because if it was, we could never make use of reality to explain appearances; we could not talk of sunlight as "the shadow of God" or of dreams as communications received over a noisy channel from a distant realm; and no one would ever write about artful realism.

Naive realism, the experience of subject-object indissolubility is an experience you can

have, whether you are ordinary—in the case of nirvana or whether you are ordinary—in the case of visual perception. But it is not something you can subscribe to, or think about, like a philosophy or a theory. To "think about" anything is to separate subject and object, and to think about the unity of subjectivity and objectivity is to acknowledge them as *two* things conflated, which requires that you draw precisely the subject-object distinction that is the denial of naive realism.

Just as it takes sophistication to write a simple sentence, it calls for artfulness to achieve naive realism. Naive realism is the direct, transparent, close at hand experience of reality. Artful realism is the theoretical account of how that experience of immediacy is achieved, when, if you think about it, reality must always be beyond experience, transcending appearance, distant, hidden, buried within, or at the very least separate and somewhere else.

### Artful Realism: Pre-Modern, Modern, and Post-Modern

That beyondness or separateness of the real has been represented by artful realists across the ages in many ways: as a signal obscured by noise; or as a hidden force operating behind the visible world; or as a transcendent realm of

gods and heroes elevated in comparison to mortal folk; or as a distant realm, perhaps a lost age of truth, when the world was free from error, distortion and sin, of which the present world of experience is but the decadent trace; or as an observing ego or spirit exiled in the interiority of a human body and unable to reach out beyond the skin or the retinal image to a mindless world exterior to the senses.

Across the ages artful realists have proposed many theories about the nature of the gap between appearance-sensation-experience and reality, the reasons for it, and how the gap might be bridged, if at all.

The most popular pre-modern theories are quite heroic (and thus anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic), placing, as they do, a good deal of confidence in the testimonials of the possessed and the visions of "seers," and in the extraordinary sightedness of virtuosos and experts credited with a special ability to make "contact" and to peer into reality as it really is.

The remaining artful realists, a diverse collection of modern and post-modern scholars, scientists and artists, seem to have difficulty with the pre-modern idea that knowledge of the really real should be established on the basis of "revealed" truths or from the miraculous experiences of a self-privileging elite claiming special powers for sensing. The modern and post-modern period are more egalitarian and bureaucratic, and their intellectual middlemen and mediums (those who bridge the gap) do not have x-ray vision or keener ears able to listen carefully to voices that no one else can hear. Modern middlemen have tricks of the trade and rules and procedures and "formal" methods and mirrors and manuals and titles; post-modern mediums have their imagination, and they rely a lot on their wits.

A very "modern" sounding theory about the nature of the gap between appearance-sensation-experience and reality, dating from at least the twelfth century, goes something like this. By the time the truths about reality (including so-called revelations) reach your mind they have been viewed through the eyes of a very mortal seer who may have been in need of glasses, and who did not speak your dialect, written down by a scribe who made transcription errors, translated by someone who was not perfectly bilingual, and narrated by a storyteller who got the emphasis all wrong.

In that artful modern conception of realism is born a hermeneutic methodism, whose goal

is to preserve or restore the fidelity of the original signal or message or "text" through the control of bias and the methodical estimation and elimination of distortion. Shattered images and grotesque forms become objects of experimentation and fascination. Post-modern realists demur, suspecting there is madness in the method of the modern.

Post-modern realists see no way across the gap between appearance-sensation-experience and reality, except through an irrepressible act of imaginative projection. Reality, according to post-modern theories is not only just obscured from sight; it is intrinsically invisible, like a black hole.

A black hole (the analogy is to confinement in the "black hole of Calcutta") is a densely compacted star possessing gravitational forces so intense it keeps imprisoned within itself and won't release its own light particles. If reality is a black hole it is fundamentally cut off from sensation and appearances; staring very hard in its direction does not help, for it can only be known speculatively and by conjecture.

So a post-modern artful realism has emerged, with the argument that the postulation of our own internal mental constructs as unseen external forces and entities is an indispensable feature of reality-seeking thought, including the best of science. An implication of the argument: what Derrida calls the "metaphysics of presence," consisting of all those asymmetrical relationships of the subject to the object, as the apparent to the real, the immediate to the distant, the visible to the hidden, the inside to the outside, and the superficial to the deep is not something we can choose to do without. For as Derrida notes, all too briefly, in a passing remark, "nothing is conceivable" without it. Reality testing is, unavoidably, a metaphysical act, implicating the knower as well as the known.

### A Parable for Artful Realists

Speaking of metaphysics and epistemology, there is a story told in anthropological circles about three baseball umpires conversing about how they call balls and strikes.<sup>1</sup> The first ump says, "I calls 'em as I sees 'em." The second ump says, "I calls 'em as they are." The third ump says, "They ain't nothin' 'till I calls 'em."

The story is usually told by a narrator in a Nietzschean frame of mind, eager to aphorize

<sup>1</sup> I first heard the story from David M. Schneider. Perhaps everyone else did, as well.

and to liberate his audience of the burdensome and phantasmagoric idea of objective constraint or of a reality hidden behind appearances. I shall try to transform the story into a parable for artful realists.

In a story with three voices it is a distinct disadvantage not to have the final word. In the Nietzschean telling of the story it is a subject inventing his own objects ("They ain't nothin' 'till I calls 'em") who has the authoritative voice, and speaks last. Yet a different effect can be produced by reordering the sequence of voices.

As the story is usually told, an empiricist enters as the first voice. He speaks in the lowbrow idiom of a baseball umpire ("I calls 'em as I sees 'em"), suggestive of an unsophisticated and guileless sensibility. That impression is reinforced by his message, a straight, simple-minded, earnest avowal of his honesty in reporting what he sees.

The second voice is that of a naive realist. Since you can't think naive realism but only experience it, when the second ump tries to express himself, directly telling his direct experience ("I calls 'em as they are"), he sounds strident and overconfident.

The story has started with the voice of a pious empiricist. Here with the naive realist it continues with the lowbrow voice of an innocent, who discredits himself by talking in incorrigible tones as though he were Superman, or a seer, equipped with transparent eyes and x-ray vision. Apparently unreflective in matters concerning "the metaphysics of presence," the second ump experiences no gap between the apparent and the real, or between the subjective "internal" representation of a thing and the objective "external" thing represented. Prearranged among the voices to give artless expression to feelings of immediacy, the voice of the second ump blusters in its oblivious certitude.

The story concludes with a voice of authority. Appearing foremost because he comes last, the third ump speaks for a reality constituting subject, reminding us indirectly but truthfully ("They ain't nothin' 'till I calls 'em") of all those questionable calls ("Strike three, you're out!") that we had to accept as binding because there was no higher court of appeal. His lowbrow idiom reinforces his devilish authority (or is it his power?) as the conversation takes a lighthearted turn away from simplicities toward guile and sophistication.

Yet the authority and sophistication of the

reality constituting ump is undermined and diminished by generating a variation on the story in which the voices are arranged in a different order. In that version it is the first ump, describing how he calls balls and strikes, who says "They ain't nothin' 'till I calls 'em." The second ump says "I calls 'em as they are." The third ump says, "I calls 'em as I sees 'em."

Here the voice that speaks first sounds nihilistic, arrogant and jejune. Perhaps it is because the first ump is so haughty in his solipsism ("They ain't nothin' 'till I calls 'em") that the voice of the second ump ("I calls 'em as they are.") no longer sounds naive. Instead it seems to index and make salient its presupposition, which is that familiar and useful truism for baseball umpires: every pitch is either a strike or not a strike and no pitch is both. The voice of the third ump ("I calls 'em as I sees 'em") rounds out the message, seemingly instructing paternalistically our puerile nihilist in a most important fact of life for baseball umpires: if you do not even *try* to "call 'em as they are" you're not going to last very long in this league.

A highbrow translation and transcription of the conversation might read like this:

"How do you call balls and strikes?" Translation: What do you have to say about the gap between appearance-sensation-experience and reality?

"I calls 'em as I sees 'em." Translation, to quote Ernest Gellner: "What piece of *evidence* could ever turn up which would show that the external world is something *more* than just experience? Whatever piece of evidence turned up would be, precisely, just one *further experience*."

"I calls 'em as they are." Translation: Appearances, sensations and experiences are not all of the same kind. Without the idea of reality we could not explain sensations, nor could we distinguish between perception and hallucination, truth and error, or between a reminiscence and a fantastic daydream. When it comes to the metaphysics of presence—the here and now brought to us from up above or from far away or from deep inside or from right before the eyes or from "through a glass darkly"—"nothin' is conceivable without it."

"They ain't nothin' 'till I calls 'em." Translation: The metaphysics present is put there by the human mind. The most fanciful idea of all is the notion that the world can be described, inscribed or specified independent of our in-

volvement with it and experience of it. Without us there is no game in town. There certainly is no game of baseball. And, without the game of baseball there are no "balls" or "strikes." Naked reality, alas, is in eternal purdah; she can never let herself be seen. It is dressed up, in style, that she appears in public, clothed in those preconceptions we left for her outside the bedroom door.

Should we choose, once and for all time, among the three umpires, or among the three sensibilities (pre-modern, modern and post-modern)? Nor if all that is mental is a never-ending process of overcoming partial views.

Not if reality is incapable of being represented completely, when represented from any one point of view, and incapable of being represented intelligibly, when represented from all points of view at once.

In the realm of artful realism every court needs a jester, just as it needs a king, and a loyal opposition. The king, thinking he has dominion over all of external reality, will eventually go out of his mind; and there will be madness in the methods of even the most loyal opposition. Which makes it ever so much more important that the jester does not lose his head.

**Richard Shweder** studied Anthropology at the University of Pittsburg and received his Ph.D. in Social Relations and Social Anthropology from Harvard University. He has done field work in Mexico, India and Africa. He has been a John Simon Guggenheim Fellow and a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences. Recent books include two co-edited volumes: *Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion* and *Metatheory in the Social Sciences: Pluralisms and Subjectivities*. He is currently an anthropologist and Professor of Human Development at the University of Chicago, and is engaged in research on culture and moral development in India and the United States.