

## The World of Concrete Contents

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### 1. The Neither-nor and the Both-and answers

In environmental debates there is a constant complaint against those who fight to ‘save’ a natural being (a river, a wood, a sea, a kind of animal or plant, a landscape) that they mainly express feelings and subjective likes and dislikes. They are said to lack a sense of objectivity, and ultimately lack adequate reference to *reality as it is in fact* and not only reality as they feel it.

Effective counterarguments need not be of a philosophical kind. But those who happen to be at home with epistemology and related more or less abstruse subjects might use this to their advantage.

Suppose we put our right hand, which has been exposed to cold air into a pot of water, and we exclaim, “ warm!” We then put our left hand, which has not been exposed into the same pot, and we exclaim “ cold!”

Question: Is the water warm or cold?

Galileo’s kind of answer: *Neither* warm *nor* cold. The water, as such, or in itself, is neither warm nor cold. These are ‘secondary’ qualities. The water as such has only ‘primary’ qualities.<sup>1</sup>

Protagoras’s answer, according to Sextus Empiricus: *Both* warm *and* cold. The water has both qualities, but the condition of the hands has the effect that one of them only *registers* the warmth, the other only coldness.<sup>2</sup>

Suppose we put our right foot which has been exposed to cold air into the calm sea, and we exclaim: “delicious!” or “encouraging!” or “cheering!” We then put our left foot which has not been exposed into the sea at the same spot, and we exclaim: “detestable!” or “discouraging!” or “abominable!”

Protagoras’s opinion according to Sextus’s interpretation might also be that the sea is *both* encouraging and discouraging, and both delicious and detestable. Consequently, according to Protagoras, as interpreted by Sextus, as interpreted by me, water has all kinds of qualities, but a sensitive being is only able to experience a limited number of them. What it will experience depends on its state.

The most interesting interpretation of ‘matter,’ as far as I can see, is such that it comprises all that man ever can experience in any state. And that the possibility is not excluded that other sensitive beings can experience additional ‘things’ which humans cannot.

The most plausible interpretation of the passage is, unfortunately, not consistent with the addition: this conclusion seems unavoidable when reading what comes next in Chapter 32:

Therefore man becomes, according to him, the criterion of the existence of things. For all things, in so far as they appear to men, also exist, while those things that appear to no man do not exist at all.

Strangely enough ‘matter’ seems to be dependent on the states of humans: it cannot comprise anything that cannot be apprehended by man. The set of states of human equals the set of states of matter.

Protagoras’s ‘matter’ I take to be an *ens rationis*, a tentative abstract structure invented in order to somehow support ‘the appearances,’ like the elephant or tortoise invented to support the earth.

In what follows, I shall maintain that Galileo’s Neither-nor position leads to absurdities. The position of Protagoras is deeply problematic, but can be saved from absurdity if somewhat freely interpreted. Furthermore, I shall maintain that it is philosophically tenable to maintain that the world we live in (the *Lebenswelt*) has secondary and tertiary qualities. What we feel about something belongs to the qualities of the world as we know it. What does not have such qualities is abstract structure.

Environmentalists talk about reality as it is in fact when they talk in terms of feelings.

## 2. Rejection of absolutist *Ding an sich* conceptions

The Galileo-type of answer uses a distinction that is useful within limits, but breaks down if absolutized. It is the famous distinction between things in themselves and things in relation to other things. (The term *thing* is taken in a very broad sense.)

Essential to ecological thinking, and also to thinking in quantum physics, is the insistence that things cannot be separated from what surrounds them without smaller or greater arbitrariness. Thing A cannot be thought of in and of itself, because of internal relation to thing B. But neither is thing B separable, except superficially, from C, and so on.

As we know them, things have properties referring to sensing, action, and comprehension. Such a primary quality as the shape of a thing varies with the perspective. There is no absolute shape of the thing-in-itself. No quality of a thing is such that it is separable from others. General relativity excludes even movement or rest. There are no primary *qualities*. A triangle is either without extension as in axiomatic, formal geometry, or it has a colour, for instance, black.

In thought and communication we need to separate, otherwise orientation gets to be impossible. The utterance “warm” relates to a whole set or constellation, but nominally and grammatically the utterance refers in our example just to ‘water.’ More precisely and specifically it refers to *water in relation to* a complex set or constellation of relata, of which the *most obvious* are the hand, the water, the medium, and the subject uttering “warm!”

These relata, individually or collectively, are not things or entities in themselves, in spite of the existence of words and phrases suggesting the possibility of isolating each of them. The relations between the relata are internal.

There is similarity between this view and those expressed by the Buddhist formula *sarvam dharmam nihsvsbhavam*. Every element is without ‘self existence.’ But the views I defend need no support from Buddhist philosophy: Western traditions suffice.

In short, the Both-and answer may be thus formulated: there are no completely separable objects, therefore no separable water or medium or organism. A concrete content can only be one-to-one related to an undividable structure, a *constellation* of factors. Concrete *contents* and abstract structures make up reality as it is in fact. It is misleading to call it *real* only *as felt by a subject*.

The notion of irreducible constellations eliminates both objectivist and subjectivist views as characterized, for instance, by J. J. C. Smart in relation to colour.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Protagoras's view, as interpreted by Sextus, is an objectivist view. Water, as a piece of matter, *is* cold. Both answers can be saved however by expanding its basis: it should be related, not to water as a separable object, but to constellations corresponding to concrete contents.

### 3. Secondary and tertiary qualities and the theory of projection

As late as in the last part of the nineteenth century, mechanical conceptions of warmth and coldness were thought to imply the Neither-nor answer. The experienced warmth or coldness is not a property of the water *itself*. To different temperatures of the water itself correspond certain levels of intensity of motion of its molecules. The *motion* in its capacity of being a *primary quality* is a property of the water in itself. Primary qualities, intrinsic or in the objects *themselves* were conceived to be part of *reality itself*. The felt warmth was considered to have only a strange kind of subjective existence: not *in* the brain, not *in* space. General relativity and quantum physics undermined the *thing-in-itself* conception, but did not cause any widespread major change of opinion.

Concrete contents have a one-to-one correlation with constellations: there is an isomorphy between the concrete and the abstract. When we say that the sea now is grey, the water of the sea is only one part of the constellation. Nevertheless it is somehow the dominant part. We would not say that the air between the sea and us is grey, or that we are grey. The sea has thousands of individual colour hues as inherent properties, but not as an isolated thing. One must take the colour of the heavens, the colour of the plankton, the waves, the senses of observers, into consideration. The colours of the sea are parts of innumerable *gestalts*.

According to the traditional doctrine of primary, secondary, and tertiary qualities or properties, colour is the *projection* upon the surfaces of things of colour-sensations generated by the senses. Only as a consequence of this projection do they *look* green, white, black, etc.

The perception of greenness in the mind is projected into the external world.

The identification of primary properties with those of objects themselves leads to a conception of *nature without any of the qualities we experience spontaneously*. There is no good reason that we should not look upon such a bleak nature as just a resource. Every appeal to save parts of nature based on reference to sense qualities of any kind gets to be meaningless. Every passionate appeal revealing deep feelings, empathy, and even identification with natural phenomena must then be ruled out as irrelevant. The sphere of real facts is narrowed down to those of mechanically interpreted mathematical physics.

Worse still: the question of how secondary and tertiary qualities come to be unreal is often answered by pointing to a (verily miraculous) capacity of the human senses and the human mind to *create* the colours and the beauty. A poet, says A. N. Whitehead ironically, should not praise the roses but himself who makes the roses red and beautiful. (Whitehead is, incidentally one of the few Western philosophers who clearly opposed the doctrine of primary qualities.)

With these aberrations in mind, I think it might be of value in deep ecology theorizing to suggest ontologies in which secondary and tertiary qualities are at least on a par with the primary ones.

The ontology I wish to defend is such that the primary properties (in a narrow sense) are *entia rationis* characteristic of abstract structures, but not contents of reality. Structures may be both, namely structures of gestalts, but not the ones I now refer to. The geometry *of* the world is not a geometry *in* the world.

The Both-and answer as elaborated here emphatically rejects the theory of projection. *There is no such process as projection of sense-qualities*. The theory is a clever invention that makes it possible to retain the notion of things in themselves retaining their separate identity in spite of the bewildering diversity of secondary and tertiary qualities. But the price of this conservation of the Galilean ontology is high: there is no evidence whatsoever of a process of projection.

#### **4. The subject/object distinction and the theory of duplication**

Suppose three people are said to point to *the same* tree but to attribute to the tree three completely different sets of secondary and tertiary qualities. How should we deal with the contradiction?

At a superficial level, contradictions are avoided by certain ways of talking: “The tree *looks* so and so *to me*.” “I *feel* the tree to be so and so.” A mere diversity of conscious experience is acknowledged, therefore no contradiction arises on this level.

Inside the consciousness of person  $P_1$  there is an experience or image  $E_1$  of a tree with the following characteristics . . . ; in  $P_2$  there is  $E_2$ , in  $P_3$ ,  $E_3$ ,  $E_1$ ,  $E_2$  and  $E_3$  all being different. The tree in the external world confronting  $P_1$ ,  $P_2$  and  $P_3$  may be *the same*, and its properties are the primary ones, most adequately described by contemporary physics. The consequences: in the example we get as many as four trees, one external, and three internal. When nobody looks at the tree, the three internal ones disappear and the external one is left alone.

This way of avoiding contradictions between two or more observers results in the famous *duplication*: there is a tree outside in the external world and a tree inside in the mind of the observer. The tree outside is today conceived in extremely abstract form because of the development of physics, as a structure with no similarity to the internal trees. In the 1890s, the external tree still had some perceptual (*anschauliche*) properties. Since Einstein and Heisenberg these are *all* gone. But Bohr has shown how this disappearance brings us back to the reality of laboratory constellations with secondary qualities.

The tree in the mind does not any longer have the character of an image or a copy, because the external tree of physics has no similarity with the internal one. Furthermore the internal is *in* the mind in a *non-spatial sense*. It is not *in* the brain because then it would have been seen long ago by doctors. It is not even *near* the brain. If the external tree and the body of the observer are in Rome, this does not imply that the tree in the observer’s mind is in or near Rome. It is not nearer Rome than the Andromeda nebula. It is not in physical space at all. Where is it?

The tree in the mind is private in principle, belonging to a specific person or animal, it is ‘subjective.’ The tree outside is ‘objective,’ supposedly completely independent of any perceivers, and a thing in itself.

All this is rather confusing. The duplication theory does not seem understandable to anybody. Nevertheless, if we take the Neither-nor answer as a basic assumption, it is difficult to avoid accepting a kind of duplication theory and a sharp, pervasive subject/object dualism.

The Both-and answer is also far from intuitively obvious, at least in *our* culture. But I think it can be effectively defended.

### **5. Spontaneous experience without subject/object cleavage, abstract structures**

When absorbed in contemplation of a concrete, natural thing, there is no experience of a subject/object relation. Nor is there when absorbed in vivid action, whether in movement or not. There is no epistemological ego reaching out to see and understand a tree or an opponent in a fight, or a problem of decision. A tree is always part of a total, a gestalt. Analysis may discover many structural ingredients: sometimes an ego-relation, sometimes not. The gestalt is a whole, self-contained and self-sufficient. If we call it “experience of the gestalt,” we are easily misled in a subjectivist direction.

When describing a constellation of gestalt relations, it is important not to let the usual stress on the epistemological subject/object distinction dominate the expression. In a spontaneous experience there may or may not be any ingredient corresponding to the distinction.

‘Tiny me looking into the eye of a big whale’ may be a concrete content with an ego-relation as a genuine part. It is different from previous examples because the qualities are not all sense-qualities. The unity of this concrete contact is best understood by stressing its gestalt character. The example refers to a gestalt of a fairly high order, that is, having lower order gestalts as ‘parts.’

If ‘cheerful tree’ and ‘dark and threatening tree’ are two spontaneous expressions, analysis in terms of relations may conclude that they refer to ‘the same’ tree. But this sameness is definable only in terms of an *abstract structure*, whereas utterances refer to two *concrete contents*.

The structure referred to is abstract and not to be confused with gestalt structures within the concrete content. The tree may have branches and the colour may contrast with a dark background. This reveals a structure within the total gestalt. This structure is given ‘phenomenologically,’ as structure within the concrete content. The sameness of the tree defined through abstract structures presupposes location in space of a kind that cannot be conceived as structure of a gestalt. It is an abstract structure, an *ens rationis*, in so far as every theory, including that of gravitation, is human-made.

My analysis at this point presumably implies a rather radical form of nominalism, but I shall not try to make it explicit. Only mention that it is closely related to the view that relations between things, or more specifically concrete contents, are not *part* of the world. Primary qualities, for instance shape, do not occur in our life space except as contrasts between colours, for instance a black circle on a white background. The concept ‘circle’ as abstracted from this concrete content is an *ens rationis* according to the above. The nominalism implied here is a nominalism of abstract relations. Problematic is the place of *entia rationis*, ‘themselves,’ within gestalts of high order. A discussion of this is important, and also the more general question of intentional entities and intentionality. But I do not find it feasible to go into this in the present article.<sup>4</sup>

## **6. From ethics to ontology and from ontology to ethics<sup>5</sup>**

Confrontations between developers reveal differences in estimating what is *real*. What a conservationist *sees* and experiences as *reality* the developer does not see—and vice versa. A conservationist *sees* and experiences a forest as a unity, a gestalt, and speaking of the heart of the forest, he or she does not speak about the geometrical centre. A developer sees square kilometres of trees and argues that a road through the forest covers very few square kilometres, so why make so much fuss? And if the conservers insist, he will propose that the road does not touch the *centre* of the forest. The *heart* is then saved, he thinks. The difference between the antagonists is rather one of ontology, than one of ethics. The gestalts “the heart of the forest,” “the life of the river,” and “the quietness of the lake” are parts of reality for the conservationist. To the conservationist the developer seems to suffer from a kind of deeply based blindness. But his ethics in environmental questions is based largely on how he sees reality. There is no way of making him eager to save a forest as long as he retains his conception of it as a set of trees. His charge that the conservationist is motivated by subjective feelings is firmly based on his view of reality. His own strong positive feelings towards development he considers are based on objective reality, and as long as the society is dominated by developers, he need not be passionate. It is the struggling minorities who are passionate rather than those who follow the mainstream

It is important, I think, in the philosophy of environmentalism, to move from ethics to ontology and back. Clarification of differences in ontology may contribute significantly to the clarification of different policies and their ethical bases. And one of the first things to do might

be to get rid of the belief that humankind is something *placed in an environment!*

Starting from concrete contents in our analysis, the is/ought and fact/value dichotomies look a little different than from where Hume started, namely from factual and value *affirmations*. Expressions of concrete contents are designations, not declarative sentences.

Expressions of the kind “object x has value y” immediately lead to the question: given an object x, how do I assess its value y? If we start with designations of concrete contents, for instance “delicious, red tomato to be eaten at once!” or “repugnant rotten tomato,” the evaluative terms are there from the very beginning of our analysis. And there is no separable tomato to value!

In his paper “Is/Ought Dichotomy and Environmental Ethics” (under publication) David Bennett says that John Passmore and Aldo Leopold “agree on the basic ecological fact, but differ on how to value this fact. Passmore imports a restricted sense of obligation and maintains the fact/value dichotomy. Leopold accepts the community as both a descriptive and prescriptive statement.”

Perhaps the point of view of Leopold could be explicated by starting with designations of concrete contents of various sorts expressing what Leopold sees and experiences as community. The terms of the designations will inevitably include valuations. There would then, strictly speaking, be no fact which they agree about nor any value that they disagree about. Bennett seems to take an ontological point of view, close to that of Callicott: “ecology changes our values by changing our *concepts* of the world of ourselves in relation to the world. It reveals new relations among objects which, once revealed, stir our ancient centers of moral feeling.”<sup>6</sup> The stirring is part of a gestalt and as such not to be isolated from the ‘objects.’ What I have done is to try to explicate what kind of change in concept of the world and status of the subject is at issue.

I propose to *identify the world with the set of contents, not with structures*. This means that the two contents referred to above are two parts of the world. The world has structures, but does not *reveal* them. We make conceptual constructs to cope with them, but they are all man-made. Gravity does not pull planets!

Between the parts of the world conceived as *contents* in the form of gestalts there are internal structural relations. But these are

distinguished from the *abstract* structure found or invented by science. The physicist's 'world of science' is entirely one of abstract structure. Even the hues of colours are defined structurally through places in colour-atlases. The ecosystem concept is used to describe abstract structures, and the movement of deep ecology is to a large extent concerned with abstract structures. The importance of abstract structural considerations cannot be overestimated.

But the factors introduced in abstract analysis should not, as is usually done, be identified with objects in the world. They do not belong to the content of the world we are genuinely part of. Abstract structures are structures *of* the world, not *in* the world.

## **7. Appearance and reality, perspectivism**

If we permit ourselves to use the terms *realness* and *reality*, I shall maintain that there is no reality 'behind' the contents. The abstract structures may be said to be real, but any definite one in the form of a theoretical construct is an *ens rationis*, but they are not 'behind' or 'underneath' the contents.

What then about the distinction between appearance and reality? Does the stress on contents favour appearance? No. If it did, something in the above argumentation has gone wrong.

We have useful kinds of expressions such as "It appears to be so and so, but it is not really so and so." If I express a content through the words "cheerful tree" and we add: "Let us place it in our window!" My friend may say "The tree is in reality very big and cannot be placed in our window. You are deceived by the great distance." Or, when somebody stands on the southern rim of Grand Canyon pointing north towards the northern side he may utter "How is it that there is only moss on the northern rim?" But his friend may not agree: "You are mistaken. The 'moss' is really a wood. The distance deceives you." The appearance/reality distinction in the above examples relates to statements which are true or false, not to designations of concrete contents.

If by 'appearance' we mean something that by definition or intrinsically is appearance to a person, we have presumed a subject/object distinction that cannot be generalized and adapted to a description of the world as concrete contents.

The rhetorics of environmentalism favour positive evaluation of natural phenomena. But, of course, concrete contents may include negative. A prisoner in 1977 on Antarctic Dawson Island uttered “sun, cold and unfriendly,” and similar expressions are common in any climate. The ontological emancipation of tertiary qualities does not imply uniformly positive evaluation of natural phenomena. In the terminology of gestalts one may say that religion has tried to conceive the most comprehensive gestalt to be (intrinsically, of course) good, and Spinoza uses the term *perfect* characterizing *Deus sive Natura*. But the problem of evil is still open. Nietzsche and others have used the term *perspective* in a way similar to that of the above term *content*: the world is the total set of perspectives. But usually we find the subject/object distinction implied in perspective. The world is seen *by subjects* in different perspectives. The tree *looks* different according to the perspective of the observer. By walking around we see the tree from different angles. Thus, ‘perspectivism’ may mislead.

Similar reflections hold good concerning the terminology of Dewey and others of ‘experience.’ It is too natural to say “experience by whom?” “My experience,” “your experience,” and so on. The term *content* does not so easily lend itself to the introduction of a subject/object division. But if used carefully the term *experience* may not mislead.

## **8. Gestalt ontology and the deep ecology movement**

Our starting point has been the Neither-nor and Both-and answer to questions whether a thing has this or a different quality. As already mentioned, elaboration of the answers may lead in different directions. I am not maintaining that my elaboration is the only consistent one. The situation in epistemology and ontology is rather problematic. What I maintain is that the framework of gestalt ontology is adequate, but scarcely the only adequate one, when trying to give deep ecology movement principles a philosophical foundation. *The world of concrete contents has gestalt character, not atomic character*. I do not know of any better frame of reference than that of gestalts.

This account does not, as mentioned, minimize the importance of abstract structures such as ecosystems (with stress on “system”). But clearly the theoretical debate centring on such concepts as ‘mature ecosystem’ shows the man-made character of the conceptual world. When some ecologists negate the existence of mature systems, this does not imply the negation of any content of the world we live in. (*The Lebenswelt*).

## References

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I take Galileo as representative of the Neither-nor answer because of his crucial position in the development of modern physics. There are of course a number of slightly or significantly different concepts of 'primary' and 'secondary' qualities. In the context of this paper, the essential aspect of primary qualities is their status as inherent in the objects themselves. Locke elaborates the 'neither warm nor cold' answer in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

<sup>2</sup> The crucial passage concerning Protagoras in Sextus's *Outline of Pyrrhonism I*, Chapter 32, runs as follows:

Now, this man says that matter is a state of flux. As it flows, continuous additions may arise to take the place of the effluxions, and the senses undergo transformation and alternation in accordance with one's age and with other conditions of the body. He says also that the grounds of all appearances lie in the matter, so that in itself its power enables it to be all those things which appear to all beings capable of apprehension. And men apprehend different things at different times because the conditions they are in are different. The man who is in a natural state, he says, apprehends those material substances that can appear to those who are in a natural state, and a person who is in an unnatural state apprehends those things which can appear to those in an unnatural state. And the same reasoning applies as well to differences depending on one's age, one's sleeping or waking state, and every kind of condition.

<sup>3</sup> J. J. C. Smart, 1961, 128.

<sup>4</sup> The nominalism I subscribe to is a consequence of the philosophy of hypothetical-deductive systems formulated in Naess, 1972.

<sup>5</sup> The term *ontology* is useful for naming that part of one's philosophy of science which tells 'what there is.' In physics and astronomy, a hundred years ago, there were atoms,

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ether, planets, stars, and forces acting upon these so-called objects. Today, the ontology proposed by astronomers and physicists is more complicated and is steadily being modified. It is mostly called classification of objects, not ontology, but the function is clearly to classify what there is according to their sciences.

Ontology as part of a philosophy and not only a group of sciences is, of course, a much more controversial affair. And it must somehow accommodate the objects that the sciences talk about, or give reasons for their non-existence. And which are the criteria of existence? Different views are open for discussion.

Until recently the (basic) ontology of physics could be understood by people other than physicists. Now this is scarcely the case. The popularizations are wonderfully well written, but do not furnish adequate understanding. Some would lament this situation, but I think it is the most positive thing happening for a long time: it makes it clearer to all concerned that any account we offer about the world we live in (*Lebenswelt*) must be independent of the ontology of modern physics.

<sup>6</sup> J. Baird Callicott, 1982, 174.