

The psychopathology of everyday metaphysics

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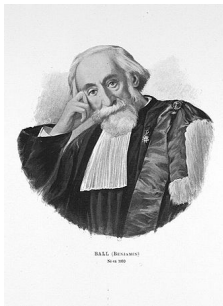
Section 1

Introduction

Ball on pathological metaphysicians

In 1883, Benjamin Ball published a case study of a carpenter suffering from a peculiar kind of “doubt folly” (Ball, 1880-1883).

As for his preoccupations, they bear on the self and the real existence of the objects he perceives. He reproduces, without knowing it, the ideas and often the very expressions of the great philosophers who probed these abysses; but, less fortunate than Descartes, he cannot manage to conclude “I think, therefore I am.”
(Ball, 1880-1883, translations from French are all mine)



- He said that objects “keep the same forms and colors” and “do everything the way they normally do”.
- Still, they seemed “funny, strange” and as a result, the “whole world seemed to him like a gigantic hallucination”.
- In an attempt to summarize his condition, he said, “the way I see things does not reflect what they are or that they exist, hence the doubt”.

Hesnard (1909) on pathological metaphysicians

Just like a dog bite can give rise to a lysophobic obsession, (...) these depersonalization ideas could stem, in a philosopher, from a metaphysical doctrine concerning the outside world. But we have carefully looked, in all our patients, for such external origins, and could never find one (Hesnard 1909:144).



Figure 2: Hesnard

From my experience, it feels like I'm stuck in a virtual reality simulator – I know I'm me, I know my thoughts and actions are my own, but my surroundings don't seem to be real. (I imagine it's a bit like what Neo feels when he goes back into the Matrix after being freed.)

Janet (1909) on pathological metaphysicians

When one has seen many of these pathological doubters [scrupuleux], one comes to sadly wonder whether philosophical speculation is a disease of the human mind (Janet, 1909, p.302).



Figure 3: Janet

Janet was half-joking, . . . yet I would like to suggest that he was half-right:

- The study of these patients can shed light on a very old problem that underlies many recent works on structuralism and digitalism:
 - **“The Problem of reality”**

I will argue that Janet was half-right: - Metaphysicians have almost always put forward a solution to this Problem of reality - Which, if it were correct, would (unacceptably) imply that these patients see the world better than we do. . . - And should accordingly be rejected. . .

Section 2

The problem of reality

The general Problem of reality

- 1 **Minimal Realism.** Some things are (ultimately) real and some things are only apparent, non (ultimately) real.
- 2 **The metaphysical silence of experience and science (first pass).** Experience and science are mute about what is (ultimately) real. For all we know we could be:
 - facing shadows in cave
 - dreaming
 - brains in vat
 - sims in a gigantic simulation. . .
- 3 **The intuition of reality (first pass).** The world as we know it seems perfectly real, and this seeming is veridical.
 - this a naïve, “Moorean” intuition

2 and 3 are inconsistent.

A (rough) structuralist version of the problem of reality

Structuralism = (roughly) the world as we know it is purely structural (ie. wholly grounded on relational and qualitative properties).

The structuralist version of the problem of reality is obtained by specifying (1-3) as follows:

- (Ultimate) reality consists either in the most basic structural facts or else in the non-structural, “substantial” facts that underly them.
- Experience and science can only show us structural facts.
- The world as we know it seems substantial and not purely structural.

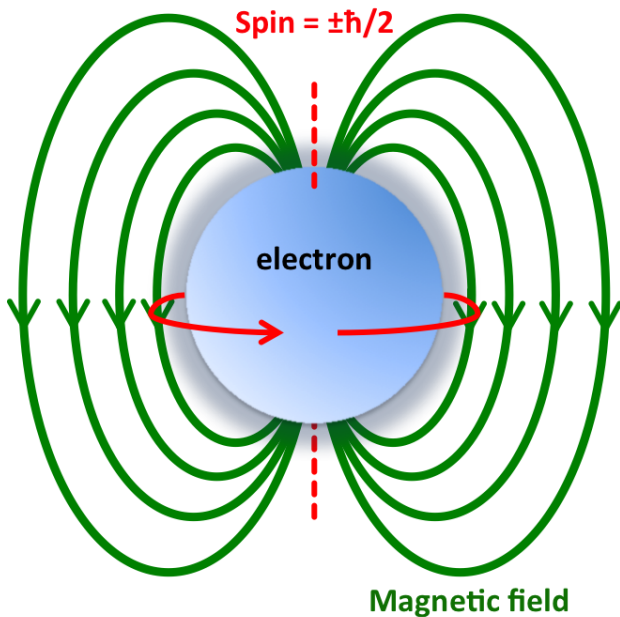
The Kantian / no-acquaintance argument for **The metaphysical silence of experience** (structuralist version):

- Because my experience of them is mediated in many ways,
- it does not tell me what properties and individuals are in themselves (their quiddities and haecceities)
- but only the way they relate to me, their dispositions to produce certain experiences in me.
- \Rightarrow I can only know some of their relational, qualitative properties



The structuralist argument for **The metaphysical silence of science** (structuralist version):

- Science does seem to bootstrap its way out of the mere testimony of experience to tell us what things are *in themselves*. Eg. Water= H_2O , colore= reflectance. . .
- Fundamentally, however, science also stops short of the deep nature of things.
- science accounts for the nature of ordinary individuals and properties in terms of descriptions of what happens at a more fundamental level.
- Yet, at the most fundamental level of elementary particles and basic forces, entities are always defined scientifically in purely relational and general terms,
 - by the role they play in the laws of fundamental physics
 - i.e. by what they do, rather than by what they are in themselves.



All that physics gives us is certain equations giving abstract properties of their changes. But as to what it is that changes, and what it changes from and to—as to this, physics is silent. (Russell 1927/1959: 18)

Structuralism = (roughly) the world as we know it is purely structural i.e.

- everything is grounded on qualitative and relational properties.
- fundamental things are defined merely by their place in a structure

The intuition of reality (structuralist version):

- van Fraassen (2006): “Just look at those empirical phenomena! They have, in an intuitive sense, both structure and [non-structural] intrinsic qualities, it seems”.
- Goff (2017, VI): Things, as the structuralist conceives of them, are “too metaphysically thin (140)” and “*not real enough* to constitute the nature of objects (ibid.)”.
- Kriegel (2019): the world of structuralists “lacks any substantial grounding in something with *real presence*”.

Like many philosophers, David Chalmers (2022) argues against the intuition of reality:

- He claims that the world as we know it is (almost entirely) structural and not *perfectly real*, akin in that respect to a merely virtual reality

Unlike many philosophers before him, he tries to help us bite the bullet:

- by arguing that virtual reality is so to speak real enough,
- and much more real than we might have naïvely thought.

In what sense is normal reality real, and can virtual reality be real in that way? It's a great philosophical question. (...) Physical reality is coming to look a lot like virtual reality right now. You could take the attitude, "So much the worse for physical reality. It's not real." But I think, no. It turns out we just take all that on board and say, "Fine, things are not the way we thought, but they're still real." That should be the right attitude toward virtual reality as well. Code and silicon circuitry form just another underlying substrate for reality. Is it so much worse to be in a computer-generated reality than what contemporary physics tells us? Quantum wave functions with indeterminate values? That seems as ethereal and unsubstantial as virtual reality. But hey! We're used to it (Chalmers, 2019, see also Chalmers 2022, part III).

Section 3

Classical (dis)solutions to the problem of reality

Tightening the problem of reality

The problem is already there at the level of experience alone (vs. experience & scientific knowledge):

- (1) **Minimal Realism**. Some things are (ultimately, metaphysically) real and some things are only apparent, non-real.
- (2') **The metaphysical silence of experience and science (second pass)**. Experience and science is mute about what is (ultimately) real.
- (3') **The intuition of reality (second pass)**. The world as we know it **through experience** seems perfectly real, and this seeming is veridical.

The fancy dissolution: deny Minimal Realism (1)

- **Minimal realism** is usually taken for granted.
- Sometimes it is explicitly advocated (Fine 2010, van Inwagen 1993:1-5).
- But it seems to rely on a (not so un)disputable form of foundationalism,
 - one could go *infinetist* or *coherentist*? See Bliss and Priest (2018), Billon (2021, forthcoming).
 - Or even opt for a perfectly *flat metaphysics* (Bennett 2011)

The philosophers' solution: deny the intuition of reality (3')

- By arguing that experience is **metaphysically silent** (2')
 - The conceivability of “skeptical” scenarios (cave, dream, brain in a vat, simulation hypotheses)
 - The structuralist “Kantian / no-acquaintance argument”.
 - Deflationary views of the sense of reality (Kant, Hume).
- Or by claiming that experience is metaphysically talkative but **metaphysically unreliable**
 - The “structuralist science argument”:
 - The scientific picture of the world is purely structural
 - and unless our experience is metaphysically silent, it will be massively deceptive (Chalmers 2022, 436-7).

The “naïve” solution: experience is metaphysically talkative and reliable

- **Subjective idealism** (Berkeley)
 - everything is grounded on experience (“ideas”).
 - our experiences are the most fundamental and most real elements,
 - and by (so to speak) telling us about themselves, they tell us about the deepest nature of things, that is, about ultimate reality.
- **Introverted metaphysics** (Kriegel 2019. . . after Brentano, Russell, Maine de Biran, Schopenhauer)
 - Experience is not metaphysically mute concerning itself (and maybe the its subject)
 - *The deep nature of things and their relation to their superficial, structural properties is akin to experience and the way it relates to its structural properties.*
 - So experience shows us directly its own deep nature, and indirectly the deep nature of other things
 - NB: introverted metaphysics is consistent with strictly but weaker than panpsychism.

A fourth conciliatory solution

One can construe Chalmers' approach to the problem of reality as conciliatory:

- (2') and (3') are not inconsistent because "real" is ambiguous between **perfect** and **imperfect** reality
- for **perfect reality** the intuition of reality (3') is false: experience does talk about perfect reality but unreliably so
- for **imperfect reality** the intuition of reality (3') is true: experience does talk about imperfect reality and reliably so.

- **Perfect reality** corresponds to the Edenic world covered with non-structural qualities (such as perfect primitive colors), that perfectly match our experiences.
- **Imperfect reality** corresponds to the structural properties, (such as the disposition to cause color experiences in us) associated with these non-structural properties.

If Chalmers' distinction between perfect and imperfect reality is to yield a genuine (as opposed to merely verbal) solution that saves the intuition of reality he must show that:

- Even though it is imperfect, imperfect reality is so to speak, real enough to deserve the name.
- Chalmers does tackle this task, and his 2022 monograph can be read as a booklength argument to the effect that:
 - Even though it is the kind of reality we would encounter in a virtual simulated world,
 - imperfect reality is indeed real enough to be considered real tout court.

His argument relies on the three following claims:

- Science describes our world as only imperfectly real, and we should not expect the world to be more real than science allows.
- Imperfectly real things can pass a couple of tests that are critical for reality (they can *exist*, be *causally efficient*, *mind-independent* and *authentic*).
- And, crucially, imperfect can pass roughly (if not perfectly) a last critical test for reality, the **test of non-illusoriness**
 - imperfect reality indeed corresponds roughly (if not perfectly) to the way the world seems to us
 - because imperfect reality has the same structure as the perfect reality that appears to us through experience
 - and is thus roughly (if not perfectly) non-illusory

Crucial claim: Being roughly non-illusory (in the sense of having the same structure as perfect reality) is being real enough.

Section 4

Solving the problem of reality through the study of psychopathology

Depersonalization and Derealization Disorder (DPD)

Psychiatric disorder characterized by a wide modification of the way things seem:

- **DP**: Impression that the self / its mental states are unreal or else alienated.
- **DR**: Impression that the outside world is unreal.

DPD patients are not delusional but there is a delusional version of DPD:

- **Cotard syndrome**: Impression & belief that self and world are unreal.

Against (2'): experience is not metaphysically mute

- . A) People with DPD normally perceive the structural feature of the world - supported by patients' reports - and by the amazing fact that their sensorimotor abilities are normal (Cappon and Banks 1968)
- . B) Yet they complain that they lack the sense of reality they used to have

This suggests that:

- our experiences normally come with a genuine sense of reality
- that this sense of reality is irreducible to a sense of certain structural features of the world
- and is a sense of substantiality: the sense that structural features of the world have a genuine and normal substrate.

A. Reports from people with DPD

The way I see things does not reflect what they are or that they exist, hence the doubt.

He was clear, however, that he perceived that things “keep the same forms and colors” and “do everything the way they normally do.

A patient of Dugas' explained that after a crisis of depersonalization, he was finally reminded that that:

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*There is a real substrate to what seemed just like a dream of life
(Dugas and Moutier, 1911)*

It seemed to me that I did not exist anymore at all, that I could see, but that it wasn't me who was seeing, that I could hear, but that it wasn't me who was hearing; I wasn't sure of anything. It seemed to me that both objects and myself were nothing but a dream anymore. This state annoyed me tremendously (. . .) (Janet, 1903, 56-7).

Instead of a dream or (like Ball's patient) a gigantic hallucination some early patients said that they felt like living in a fictional world.

Nowadays, many patients readily evoke a gigantic computer simulation:

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For most people, this [the simulation hypothesis] is a fun little theory that has little basis in reality. For persons with derealization, however, this is not simply a fun theory to think about, but instead, a question that we have to constantly tell ourselves not to pursue.

Another patient describes his experience as follows:

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From my experience, it feels like I'm stuck in a virtual reality simulator – I know I'm me, I know my thoughts and actions are my own, but my surroundings don't seem to be real. (I imagine it's a bit like what Neo feels when he goes back into the Matrix after being freed.)

A. Intact sensorimotor abilities

There is an objective confirmation that patients still perceive normally the structure of the world: their intact sensorimotor abilities ...

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To summarize, patients keep a normal perception and sensation of the outer world, but they have lost the feeling of reality that is ordinarily inseparable from these perceptions. And the same goes for the perception of oneself (...). They have kept all the psychological functions but they have lost the feeling that we always have (...). of being real, of being part of the reality of the world (see Janet (1903, 353-4)).

These classical clinical observations have been confirmed by modern experimental studies,

- which found no sensorimotor impairment (Cappon and Banks, 1965),
- even in often neglected modalities such as interoception (Michal et al. 2014).

Against Introverted metaphysics and idealism

- Introverted metaphysics and idealism imply that the sense of reality for outer things depends on that for inner things.
- Yet it has been observed that DP (the impression that one and one's mental states are unreal) and DR (the impression that outer things seem unreal) do not always occur together in DPD.
- Pure DP is not totally uncommon (see e.g. Lambert et al. 2001).

Does DPD give us reasons to endorse (3')?

At this point, one might grant that

- (2') is wrong: experience is not metaphysically mute.
- But argue that it is metaphysically unreliable: i.e. that what it says about (ultimate) reality is unreliable,
- which makes the intuition of reality (3') wrong anyway
 - this would be perfectly consistent with Chalmers' solution to the effect that inasmuch as it talks about perfect reality, experience is wrong

DPD does give us reason to endorse (3')

However,

- As DPD patients see the world exactly like us except for its reality
- Someone who, like Chalmers, claims that our experience of (perfect) reality is metaphysically unreliable must claim that they see the world better than us !
- But DPD is a mental disorder (and hence a dysfunction), it is completely implausible that DPD patients see the world better than us.

N.B.: Invoking a psychiatric disorder is not meant, merely, as an hyperbolic illustration of the Moorean intuition to the effect that things are perfectly real:

- My argument relies on the idea that DPD is a harmful dysfunction.
- Our perceptual system is fine-tuned and whatever its proper function is,
- it is completely unlikely that a disorder of this system (a dysfunction) could allow him to better fulfill a function such as “getting a better conception of the world”
 - Think about the probability that by changing the connection of two wires on a radio receiver it might become capable to receive some hidden radio waves better!
 - By inverting two wires, you are almost certain to prevent your radio receiver from functioning at all.

Chalmers' arg. for the "reality of imperfect reality"

As we saw, Chalmers' main argument for the claim that something not perfectly real can still be genuinely real relies on the idea that:

- imperfectly real things pass, if only imperfectly, the test of non-illusoriness
- because imperfectly real things have the same function as perfectly real ones

But why should we believe that being imperfectly real count as being real **enough**?

- a. Things' causal role or "function" is a very important part of our ordinary concept of these things, and provided it is preserved, we can count things as genuinely real (2022:428-430).
- b. Connectedly, all our ordinary beliefs (as opposed to our metaphysical beliefs) would remain true if reality were only imperfect reality (2022:127-8).

But...

- DPD patients commonly say that things do not seem to exist at all or to have genuine properties such as genuine colors, and Cotard patients who take DPD experiences at face value (and can reflect quite rationally and philosophically on their situation) may reject **all** ordinary beliefs.
- This suggests that if we saw the world as only imperfectly real and believed what we see, we would not regard our ordinary beliefs as true.
- Yet, it is hard to maintain with Chalmers that our ordinary beliefs would remain true in a situation X if,
 - were our situation to seem like X, and were we to believe we are in X
 - we could not regard our ordinary beliefs as true.
- Moreover, if the truth or all of our ordinary beliefs does indeed depend on perfect reality,
 - then the latter matters much more for us than Chalmers assumes...
 - and it might matter more than the thing's functional role.

My disagreement with Chalmers is in part metaphilosophical:

- In order to assess **whether imperfect reality is real enough** Chalmers resorts to the classical armchair methodology:
- He envisions a scenario in which the world is not perfectly real but things keep the same causal role (he believes this scenario is actual but that does not matter for my point) and he wonders:
 - If that is the case, should we say that our ordinary beliefs are correct and that the world is still real?
- His answer is yes.
- He takes that to show that our ordinary concepts of, say colors and shapes, or meliorated versions thereof, still apply to imperfect colors and imperfect shapes, and more importantly, that our ordinary concept of reality (or meliorated versions thereof) still applies to imperfect reality.

In order to assess **whether imperfect reality is real enough**, I use a different method:

- I wonder what we would say (after reflection) if we were suddenly plunged into a world that seems only imperfectly real to us and that we took to be only imperfectly real,
- and I use psychopathology to answer this question.

The two methods will yield different results when

- it is difficult to predict the experiences we would have in the envisioned scenario, that is, when the *phenomenology is somehow opaque*,
- and when our best concepts are partly *recognitional concepts*, i.e. concepts whose application is partly grounded on experience.

Section 5

The meta-problem of reality

A solution to the problem of reality

The consideration of DPD suggests a trivial and really naïve solution to the problem reality:

- Deny the silence of experience (2') and endorse the intuition of reality (3') for all inner and outer things alike

This trivial solution raises the question:

- Why have we considered the problem of reality a problem in the first place?

The meta-problem of reality

Why have we considered the problem of reality a problem in the first place?

- Alquié (1955:27, 1956, 1974/2023:329-333) argued that Descartes' metaphysics was secretly indebted to some DPD-like experiences he went through. . .

He later generalized his point:

- “Metaphysics, he said, has always seemed to be, in one way or another, an endeavor of derealisation (Alquié 1955, 98)”
- “No one would become a philosopher, he said in a 1974 note, if he were not first a little crazy, I mean if he were not led by some feeling of unreality experienced in front of things, to ask himself questions that reasonable people do not ask themselves (Alquié 1974/2023, p.331)”.

Alquié's echoes Janet's suggestion that philosophers suffer from DPD, but this suggestion is implausible.

Why have we considered the problem of reality a problem in the first place?

- We can answer this question by studying the neuropsychological accounts of DPD
- The latter point toward:
 - an affectivity deficit
 - and a “subjectivity” deficit: a deficit in the self-locating features of experience thanks to which we can adopt a subjective point of view on the world.

By neglecting the subjective point of view and our affective embedding in the world, philosophical reflection would simultaneously

- mimic the viewpoint of DPD patients
- and stumble on the Problem of reality.

Section 6

Appendix

Structuralism (more precisely)

Structural

A property is structural if it is grounded on qualitative and relational properties

Excludes haecceities (primitive non-qualitative properties) and quiddities (primitive non-relational properties)

Structuralism

Everything is grounded on structural properties

3 connected intertwined traditions:

- The first, Kantian in inspiration, starts from the idea that our knowledge is severely bounded:
 - it depends on the way things causally relate to our experience
 - as opposed to acquaintance with the things themselves,
 - Cf. Russell 1927, recent works in
 - the metaphysics of individuals and properties (e.g. Armstrong 1997, Shoemaker 1980),
 - in Kantian scholarship (Rae Langton (1998)'s analyses of Kantian humility),
 - or in analytic epistemology of metaphysics (Jackson (1998), Lewis (2009)).

- The second structuralist current is rooted in Klein's Erlangen program (see Ihmig 1999) and Poincaré (1905,1908)'s classical writings in the philosophy of science
 - It characterizes objectivity in terms of symmetry invariance,
 - and defines structure as what is indeed left invariant by the symmetries of nature
 - entailing that objective knowledge must be knowledge of structure (see Nozick (2001) for a recent defense)
- The third current is also rooted in the writings of Poincaré (1905), but was resurrected by Worrall (1989) as a potent move in the late 20th-century controversy over scientific realism.
 - even though scientific change seems to forbid naïve forms of scientific realism,
 - there is enough continuity in the structure of succeeding scientific theories to warrant a form of realism about the “structural content” of scientific theories (see Ladyman (2020) for an overview).
- Structural = (roughly)
- Structuralism = (roughly) inasmuch as we can know them, things are defined by their place in a structure, rather than by what they are in themselves. . .