

WHAT IS REALISM ?

The term, realism, is not easily defined. In Lalande's Vocabulaire, realism and idealism are considered opposite terms, but the word, realism, is said to share all the indeterminacy of its opposite, idealism, and that word is pronounced so indeterminate that the reader is advised not to employ it at all.

M. N. Gorce in the Dictionnaire de théologie catholique is more forthright. Realism is described as the philosophy that (1) is implicit in Catholicism and in most forms of Christianity and (2) occupies an intermediate position between extremes named nominalism and idealism. Nor are these terms considered so vague as to be useless.

L'une de ces deux positions extrêmes, le nominalisme, tend à nier la valeur des idées, au moins des concepts; l'autre position extrême, l'idéalisme, tend à ôter à la connaissance sensible sa valeur absolue de représentation d'un monde extérieur, sa valeur indépendante de l'esprit humain.

Realism consequently is the position that acknowledges the value or validity both of sensitive knowledge and of ideas and concepts.

One might be happier about these statements if Prof. Gilson had not written at some length against a position that he names essentialism. It includes both idealism and ^a mistaken realism. Its characteristic is to overlook existence in things and the existential import of judgements. For Prof. Gilson a genuine realism stresses existential judgement; in its historical origins it is to be associated with ontological connotations found in the ^{biblical} name of God, "I am who am", with the dogmatic traditions of the Catholic Church and, in his

personal experience, with the old-style catechism.

It does not seem that Prof. Gilson's realism will fit into R. P. Gorce's scheme. When only two factors are considered, either one stresses sense to the neglect of ideas and concepts, or one stresses ideas and concepts to the neglect of sense, or one gives both their due. But when a third, original factor enters into consideration, a unilinear scheme has to be replaced by a triangle. Prof. Gilson introduces a third, original factor: his existential judgement is neither a sensitive activity nor an idea or concept nor an essentialist conjunction of the two. Hence, instead of two extremes and an intermediary, we now have nominalism on one side of ^a ~~the~~ triangle, idealism on the other, essentialist realism combining these two sides, and the realism Prof. Gilson praises occupying all three sides.

Such a basic shift implies a wholesale reinterpretation of philosophic concepts and philosophic history. Following his bent, Prof. Gilson expressed himself through the medium of historical interpretation. His account of realism is not the essentialist account. His critique of idealism is not the essentialist critique. His view of the relations between ~~his~~ realism and Catholicism is not merely more precise ~~but also~~ ~~different than the essential view but also~~ than the essentialist view but also different in kind. It is plain that an any ontology, in which existence is known in the existential judgement, will differ from an ontology in which existence is not known in this precise manner. It is no less plain, though Prof. Gilson will have no truck with epistemological questions, that a view of knowledge based on three factors will differ essentially from a view of knowledge based upon two.

confined to nominalism and idealism; essentialist realism also would be arraigned because it merely combined nominalism and idealism instead of going beyond them to the essentially different position that alone merits the name of realism.

Moreover, these philosophic antitheses would ~~not~~ have their theological significance. R. P. Gorce remarked that realism is the ~~philosophy~~ philosophy implicit in Catholicism. Clearly, if there are two views of realism, one has to ask which is the one that is implicit in Catholicism. I believe that Prof. Gilson would say that essentialist realism, so far from the philosophy implicit in Catholicism, is in fact the philosophy that systematically disregards the original contribution of Hebrew and Christian thought to philosophy.

Further questions arise. When one acknowledges the value or validity of sense and, again, the value or validity of ideas and concepts, is one speaking of two distinct ~~irreducibilities~~ and irreducible validities, or does one merely mean that there is only one primitive validity, that of sense, from which a second validity may be derived by a process named abstraction? Again, if one acknowledges three distinct and irreducible validities, all all three to be taken in one and the same univocal sense of the word, validity, or are there three specifically different properties of human knowledge each of which contributes in its own manner to the compound validity of man's compound knowing.

this difficulty as best we may, we propose to begin from a few linguistic notes and then proceed from more integrated towards more atomistic views of knowing.

For Aristotle prime matter is not a thing and substantial form is not a thing; they are parts or components of a thing. The reason for this is, of course, not some peculiarity of the word, thing, but the fact that Aristotle conceived material things as structured wholes. Similarly, because Aquinas conceived the structure of the material thing in a different manner, ~~for~~ the compound of matter and form, which for Aristotle was a thing, for him was not a thing but only the essence of a thing. The same type of linguistic variation occurs with regard to the verb, know~~ing~~. For a cognitional atomist, knowing denotes a common feature found in every cognitional activity: seeing, hearing, smelling, understanding, conceiving, weighing the evidence, judging, and inferring are all equally instances of knowing; if they were not, they could not be cognitional activities. But when knowing is found to have a structure, then knowing denotes a whole, and cognitional activities are only parts; since the part is not the whole, there exist cognitional activities singly that are not knowing though in appropriate conjunctions they are knowing. Now there is no doubt that the ~~xx~~ atomistic and the structured views of knowing are contradictory. But when the former asserts that conceiving is knowing and the latter asserts that conceiving is not knowing but merely thinking, one is merely confusing the issue in obtuse fashion if one fancies that there is any ~~x~~ other difference between the two views apart from the negation and the affirmation of structure.

this difficulty as best we may, we propose to begin from a few notes on the linguistic problem, and to proceed from more integrated to less integrated views.

The linguistic problem is already familiar from a parallel ontological instance. In Thomistic metaphysics prime matter, substantial form, essence, and existence are not things, but components in one composite thing. Similarly, when knowledge is conceived as a composite whole, then the verb, know, cannot be taken as ~~experience~~ the name of a common feature found in each and every cognitional activity; on the contrary, it has to be the name of the compound resulting from combining several activities. Hence, just as prime matter is, not a thing, but a thing in ^{first} potency, so when knowing is conceived as a compound, experience (all sensing and all consciousness) is, not knowing, but knowing in first potency. Similarly, just as a material substantial form is, not a thing, but ~~activity~~ the first act of a thing, so also understanding is, not knowing, but the first act of knowing. Again, just as a material essence is, not a thing, but ~~it~~ a thing in second potency, so also ~~conceiving~~ ^{conceiving}, thinking, defining, forming hypotheses, deducing their consequences are, not knowing, but knowing in second potency. Further, just as existence is, not a thing, but the second act of a thing, so also the proper content of a judgement, the bare 'Yes' or 'No,' is not knowing but the second act of knowing. Finally, just as matter and form, essence and existence, together constitute the material thing, so also experience and understanding, thinking and the proper content of a judgement, constitute together a single instance of human knowing.