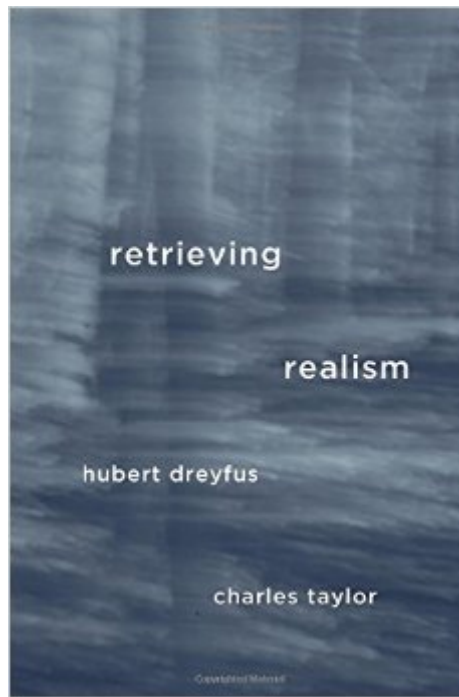


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Retrieving Realism



Synopsis

“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’ 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.

Book Information

Hardcover: 184 pages

Publisher: Harvard University Press (June 11, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0674967518

ISBN-13: 978-0674967519

Product Dimensions: 6.3 x 0.8 x 9.5 inches

Shipping Weight: 15.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (5 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #229,946 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #70 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Movements > Phenomenology](#) #178 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Epistemology](#) #525 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Philosophy > Modern](#)

Customer Reviews

Dreyfus and Taylor present a unique solution to the problems of knowledge and realism, 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.

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.

Short review
In one of his many philosophical jokes Woody Allen tells us of the man who thought he was a mouse. After months in the psychiatric ward he is released as cured only to come back the next day, trembling of fear: "But you know, you're not a mouse!" "Yes, but does the cat know that too?" The history of curing philosophy from Cartesian epistemology and ontology seems to have gone somewhat like that. Instead of moving on to a different game many post-Cartesian philosophers seem only to have changed teams: from supporters of the mighty cat (Cartesian subject) to defenders of the endangered mouse (things-in-themselves). Understandably so, capitalism being cat-worship. Sadly, this little interesting book, attempts an analysis of the whole history including a cure and a way of understanding things without playing cat-and-mouse " only to end up mainly in the mouse-protection business. Basically it is a two-part endeavor: overcoming Cartesian epistemology and ontology and understanding the " new world" this leaves us in. For the first part, Taylor/Dreyfus give us the concept of the mediational theory in order to understand, what Cartesian epistemology (including its modern offspring) means. For the second part, they give us an epistemological "Contact Theory" and a "robust but plural realism" (versus "deflationary realism"). As philosophy this is very readable. But it takes care, time, and some background knowledge. Educated in Analytic Philosophy you're programmed for misunderstanding. Like baseball it can't be understood just reading the rules. You will have to practice it for some time.

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