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COHERENCE AND REALITY

A REAPPRAISAL OF THE DOCTRINE OF INTERNAL RELATIONS

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PREFACE

Despite its close ties with science, progress in philosophy is nearly as elusive as progress in art. Any student of logic knows that the so-called *Argumentum ad novitatem* is a fallacy, and that to regard a philosopher as superior to another merely because he belongs to a tradition that is closer to ours, whether in time or in spirit, is logically flawed. As far as we know, the road to philosophical progress has always been full of twists and wrong turns, and fraught with many *cul-de-sacs*; and it is notoriously difficult to know whether we are ourselves engaged in the main on the right track. In science at least we know that we have made great and irreversible advances beyond our Victorian predecessors; but who would venture to say that in philosophy the same principle holds? Are we to take the dominant philosophical school of our day as the pinnacle of philosophical thought, and regard any significant departure from it as an outworn and worthless position? This, of course, would be sheer dogmatism. History has taught us that Kant's 'Copernican Revolution'¹ differs with the revolution wrought by Copernicus in at least one important respect: whereas in astronomy there is no possible return to Ptolemy, in philosophy an anti-Copernican counterrevolution is always in principle at hand – as Hegel, and more recently Davidson, have for instance illustrated². In philosophy we cannot repudiate a doctrine on the ground that it has been superseded, for being superseded is no more a proof of falsity than the gathering of dust is a proof of obsolescence. Only that which has been thoroughly refuted can be provisionally declared dead, and only as long as the refutation itself has been kept alive. Unless these conditions have been fulfilled, the possibility of a return match ought to remain open.

¹ E. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith, London, McMillan, 1964, B xvi-xvii (1781).

² G. W. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, §73; D. Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford, OUP, 1984, pp. 183-198.

Analytic philosophy is now generally regarded as the dominant philosophical tradition in the English-speaking world, and its influence has perhaps never been so strong as it is today. A conspicuous feature of this school is its celebration of logical rigor and lucidity, as well as its insistence on clear and almost razor-sharp thinking. But another and perhaps less congenial feature of this school is its appropriation of the rhetoric of scientific progress, and its claim to have at last put philosophy on the ‘right’ track. Even though the bulldozing days of logical positivism are gone, this attitude remains very much alive in the belief that analytic philosophy has not only superseded Idealism, but has actually rendered it philosophically obsolete³. Its main proponents, even today, are seldom if ever read, as though there were nothing of value to be found in their ideas; and “the chronicles of British philosophy as taught in our universities stops at Mill to start again with Russell and Moore”⁴. Chief among these discredited ideas is, by common opinion, the ‘doctrine of internal relations’ – i.e. the theory that the world is a coherent system whose parts are so intimately related that the nature of each is characterized completely by its relations to all the rest. First criticized by Russell and Moore themselves, this doctrine is still widely regarded today as obviously false, as a mere museum piece to be looked upon in the way scientists look upon outdated theories. Its repudiation, it is true, played a large role in the founding myth of the analytical school⁵, but one might rightly expect that such a wholesale dismissal must find its motivation in a thorough refutation of the idealistic viewpoint. If the accusation of obsolescence is to be made good, it should, by the very standard of that school, be traced back to an argument so powerful and decisive as to leave no place for doubt – and no place, in particular, for any return match.

The main thesis I shall be advocating, however, is that this triumphalist story is itself but a myth. As matter of fact, the doctrine of internal relations has only been successfully discredited, but not in any way refuted. When it has not been dismissed on commonsensical grounds, it has been rejected, either tacitly or openly, on the basis of an alternative metaphysics whose cogency has been simply assumed⁶. This rival metaphysics was, and by and large remains, the well-known atomism of Hume. This is the doctrine that all there is to the universe is “a vast mosaic of local

³ There are, of course, some notable exceptions, such as Putnam, McDowell, or Brandom.

⁴ W. J. Mander, *British Idealism. A History*, Oxford, OUP, 2014, pp. 1-2, pp. 544-545.

⁵ N. Griffin, “Russell and Moore’s Revolt Against British Idealism”, in M. Beaney (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Analytic Philosophy*, Oxford, OUP, 2013, pp. 383-406 (in part. p. 392).

⁶ E. E. Harris, “Coherence and its critics”, *Idealistic Studies* 5, 1975, pp. 208-30.

matters of particular facts”⁷, between which there are no necessary connections and each of which may or may not be the case without affecting all the rest. Although this view is by now taken as the default position, it is a substantive doctrine as much in need of defense as the doctrine it was meant to displace⁸. As I shall argue, however, the empiricist framework that prompted its rejection may itself be questioned on empirical and logical grounds; whereas the empirical foundation of the doctrine of internal relations may, by contrast, be quite substantial⁹. And once cleared of the numerous fallacies involved in its summary dismissal, it should indeed become less clear whether the very doctrine upon whose rejection the analytic school was founded may not even be sound.

Even though recently there have been signs of a renewed interest in the theory of internal relations *within* the analytical school¹⁰, few contemporary philosophers seem to realize the extent to which its endorsement would put into question the very framework within which they work. If Bosanquet, Joachim or Blanshard are in the main right on this issue, then “a good deal of twentieth-century philosophy must be seen as either misguided or anachronistic”, and anyone who is willing to defend their views should “be prepared to abandon some of the most cherished ideas of mainstream philosophical analysis”¹¹. It is, I think, seldom realized how heavily the method of analysis – its emphasis on language, its extensive use of formalism as well as its atomistic approach – rests on the Humean gospels and their attendant metaphysics. If the various arguments against the theory of internal relations have any point at all, it is indeed less in demonstrating that the theory is unsound than in showing that it is inconsistent with the overall framework of the analytical school, and with the main assumptions thereof. A significant reorganization of the philosophical field would be indeed required if we were to allow the world to be more than “an enormous catalogue or congeries of contingent facts”¹². For not only a very different kind of metaphysics, but also a very different kind of epistemology and logic would have to be developed if the doctrine of internal relation is to be consistently adopted.

⁷ D. Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford, OUP, 1987, vol. II, p. x.

⁸ J. Heil, *Appearance in Reality*, Oxford, OUP, 2021, p. 187. See also T. Maudlin, “Why Be Humean?”, in *The Metaphysics Within Physics*, Oxford, OUP, 2007, pp. 50-77.

⁹ Cf. E. E. Harris, *The Foundations of Metaphysics in Science*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1965.

¹⁰ Cf. J. Schaffer, “The Internal Relatedness of All Things”, *Mind*, 119 (474), 2010, pp. 341-376.

¹¹ P. Ferreira, *Bradley and the Structure of Knowledge*, State University of New York Press, 1999, p. 13.

¹² B. Blanshard, *Reason and Analysis*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1962, p. 170.

What I have to offer, however, is neither an apology for Idealism nor a full front attack on contemporary metaphysics. Although I do not claim originality for most of the views that I shall be defending, neither do I intend to offer a mere restatement of the idealistic principles. My aim is rather to develop a systematic philosophical scheme – what I propose to call a ‘coherence theory’ – within which the doctrine of internal relation is to find anew a central place. Together with the fresh advent of ‘metaphysical coherentism’¹³, recent proposals in the philosophy of science seem to render this endeavor timely and particularly relevant. These contemporary developments, as I shall argue, are nevertheless but intimation towards an ontological scheme which, if fully and coherently developed, would lead to a quite radical repurposing of the current philosophical landscape. It is such an ontological scheme that I shall try to outline and defend, with a grandness of design which, I hope, is counterbalanced by careful and detailed arguments. To which extent this scheme may itself be regarded as idealistic I shall leave to the reader to judge for him or herself. If I might be able to express less ambiguously and more plainly what some idealists have said in favor of the coherence theory while highlighting the relevance of their ideas for contemporary thought, I would already consider my endeavor, whatever its other merits, to be successful.

¹³ M. Morganti, “From ontic structural realism to metaphysical coherentism”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Science*, 9 (1), 2018, pp. 1-20; N. Thompson, “Metaphysical interdependence, epistemic coherentism, and holistic explanation”, in R. Bliss and G. Priest (eds.), *Reality and its Structure. Essays in Fundamentality*, Oxford, OUP, 2018, p. 107-125.