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X*-WHAT IS "REALISM"?
by Hilary Putnam
While it is undo ubtedly a good thing that "ism" words have
gone out of fashion in philosophy, some "ism" words seem
remarkably resistant to being banned. One such word is
"realism". More and more philosophers are talking about
realism these days; but very little is said about what realism
is. This paper will not answer that very large question; but
I hope to contribute a portion of an answer.
Whatever else realists say, they typically say that they
believe in a Correspondence Theory of Truth.
When they argue for their position, realists typically argue
against some version of Idealism-in our time, this would be
Positivism or Operationalism. (This is not in itself surprising
-all philosophers attempt to shift the burden of proof to
their opponents. And if one's opponent has the burden of
proof, to dispose of his argument seems a sufficient defence
of one's own position.) And the typical realist argument
against Idealism is that it makes the success of science a
miracle. Berkeley needed God just to account for the success
of beliefs about tables and chairs (and trees in the Quad);
but the appeal to God has gone out of fashion in philosophy,
and, in any case, Berkeley's use of God is very odd from the
point of view of most theists. And the modern positivist has
to leave it without explanation (the realist charges) that
"electron calculi" and "space-time calculi" and "DNA
molecules. If there are such things, then a natural explanation of the success of the se theories succeed each other-say,
there are no electrons, no curved space-time, and no DNA
molecules. If there are such things, then a natural explanation of the success of these theories succeed each other-say,
there are no electrons is that a partially correct/partially
"Meeting of the Aristote lian Society at 5/7, Tavistock Place, London,
WC.i., on Monday, 23rd February 1976, at 7.30 p.m.

incorrect account of a theoretical object-say, the gravitational field, or the metric structure of space-time, or both-is replaced by a better account of the same object or objects. But if these objects don't really exist at all, then it is a miracle that a theory which speaks of gravitational action at a distance successfully predicts phenomena; it is a miracle that at theory which speaks of curved space-time successfully predicts phenomena; and the fact that the laws of the former theory are derivable "in the limit" from the laws of the latter theory has no explained methodological significance.

I am not claiming that the positivist (or whatever) has no rejoinder to make to this sort of argument. He has a number: reductionist theories of the meaning of theoretical terms, theories of explanation, etc. Right now, my interest is rather in the following fact: the realist's argument turns on the success of science, or, in an earlier day, the success of common sense material object theory. But what does the success of science have to do with the Correspondence Theory of Truth?—or any theory of truth, for that matter?
That science succeeds in making many true predictions, devising better ways of controlling nature, etc., is an undoubted empirical fact. If realism is an explanation of this fact, realism must itself be an over-arching scientific hypothesis. And realists have often embraced this idea, and proclaimed that realism is an empirical hypothesis. But then it is left obscure what realism has to do with theory of truth. In the present paper, I shall try to bring out what the connexion is between explaining the success of knowledge and the theory of truth.

In the convergence" of scientific realism' is often called "scientific realism" is one who believes, inter alia, that all knowledge worthy of the name is part of "science", then I am not a "scientific realist". But scientific knowledge is certainly an impressive part of our knowledge, and its nature and















