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X*-WHAT IS "REALISM"?

by Hilary Putnam

While it is undoubtedly 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 arguments 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 calculi" correctly predict observable phenomena if, in reality, 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 is that they are partially true accounts of how they behave. And a natural account of the way in which scientific theories succeed each other-say, the way in which Einstein's Relativity succeeded Newton's Universal Gravitation-is that a partially correct/partially

* Meeting of the Aristotelian Society at 5/7, Tavistock Place, London, W.C.1, on Monday, 23rd February 1976, at 7.30 p.m.

