Reality check: Some thoughts in response to Pablé
Peter E. Jones, Sheffield Hallam University

Part 1

House: It was so perfect. It was beautiful.
Wilson: Beauty often seduces us on the way to truth.
House: And triteness kicks us in the nuts.
Wilson: So true.
House: This doesn’t bother you?
Wilson: That you were wrong? I try to work through the pain.
House: I was not wrong. Everything I said was true. It fit. It was elegant.
Wilson: So – reality was wrong.
House: Reality is almost always wrong.¹

Adrian Pablé, in his thought provoking piece on Richard Rorty and Roy Harris, argues that the ‘Harrisian integrationist considers Rorty’s ideas of knowledge, reality and truth very differently from the realist philosopher’ (2). And his paper sets out an alternative account of ‘reality’ to that offered by ‘the realist philosopher’.

But compare with the passage from Harris (2009, 162) quoted later:

- ‘all knowledge is internally generated by the human capacity for sign-making,’
- ‘the external world supplies input to this creative process but does not predetermine the outcome’ (6).

The recognition of the existence of ‘the external world’ is already, at least for some, a ‘realist’ position. Would it be fair to say, then, that the position developed by Adrian is indeed a form of realism?

As Roy Harris puts it elsewhere:

Our confidence about everyday reality is confidence about the way our senses confirm one another, i.e. are integrated, at least in the immediate here-and-now. You can not only see a book on your desk but pick it up and move it somewhere else. The simplest way of accommodating those diverse experiences intellectually is to believe in the reality of the book (2012, 21).

The issue around which the traumatic conflict between Galileo and the Church erupted was precisely over the way in which diverse experiences were to be accommodated or reconciled. Galileo had already had a stunning success in this area. In his Discourse on Things that Float on Water he had refuted the Aristotelian position that objects sink or

¹ From ‘Occam’s Razor’, House, Series 1, Episode 3, 2004, NBC.
float because of their shape (Koestler 1973, 434). His basic procedure had been rather simple: put different things in water and watch what happens. The Aristotelians objected and the dispute went on for years but finally ‘ended in a complete rout’, ‘both spiritual and physical’ of Galileo’s critics (1973, 434).

Before the invention of the telescope, it had never been imagined that one could look directly at heavenly bodies at close range. In that context the pronouncements of the Church on cosmology might have been thought unassailable. But when you could see the planets up close, that was a different matter ...

But the dispute was not so much about ultimate truths - Galileo was happy to accept the authority of church doctrine over matters unobservable (at that time) - as about the freedom to revise traditional wisdom in the light of observation, the right to exercise one’s sign-making activities in such a way as to accommodate, rather than to violently and arbitrarily fragment, the evidence of one’s own senses. To the Church, the evidence of the senses was a triteness come along to kick them in the nuts.

Part 2

**Sister:** Are you trying to talk me out of my faith?

**House:** You can have all the faith you want in spirits and the afterlife and heaven and hell. But when it comes to this world, don’t be an idiot. Cos you can tell me that you put your faith in God to get you through the day but when it comes time to cross the road I know you look both ways.

**Sister:** I don’t believe he is inside me and is going to save me. I believe he is inside me whether I live or die.

**House:** Then you might as well live. Got a better chance betting on me than on Him.²

What difference does it make to your life to ‘know’ something or believe one way or another? Is it possible for people to collaborate while believing different, and perhaps quite contradictory things about, for example, the universe and our place in it? It obviously is. Up to a point…

Such disconnects are all over the place, all the time. What difference does it make to the departure time of the Sheffield to London train what the notice on the station café says about the breakfast special?

Plenty of dots, few joins.

So the staff in the station café — writing the specials menu, clearing the tables — have a quite different ‘reality’ from me as a passenger on the 10.17 to London. My reality is finding my seat on the train and getting a heavy bag on the luggage rack. They will never know my reality, nor I theirs.

² From ‘Damned if you do’, House, Series 1, Episode 5, 2004, NBC.
Then, before we depart, a message from the ‘on-train team’ through the loudspeaker: ‘We regret to inform you of a delay in the departure of this train. The driver is indisposed due to an allergic reaction to today’s breakfast special in the station café’.

Worlds collide.

This is perhaps a little like the ‘Barbara case’ as presented by Adrian. The two Barbara’s (as his sister has it) suddenly merge into one as his sister joins the dots of experience, as the penny drops.

The case ‘raises the question’, as Adrian puts it, ‘whether we can ever have certainty about anything, because one day we might realize that what we have taken so far to be incontrovertible facts turn out to be no facts at all.’ But Adrian seems to reassure us here, on the grounds that this ‘is a worry linked to positing an objective world on the one hand and the individual’s consciousness of that world on the other hand, and to think that the latter must match with the former’ (20-21).

Adrian appears to offer, as a substitute for an epistemology of ‘matching’, ‘the realness of the individual’s sign-making activities’ (21). But it is difficult to appreciate how that might satisfy us completely as a basis for engaging with the world, and understanding that engagement. After all, his sister’s sign-making activities when she thought there were two Barbara’s were just as real as when she realized there was only one. But the former, she must have concluded, were mistaken (though explicable) and the latter a better ‘match’ (with ‘reality’). Perhaps the issue, then, is not so much that we have reason to be in a state of constant anxiety about being blindsided by ‘the facts’ in all the minutiae of everyday existence, but that we have ways of adjusting, of revising, our sign-making activities to enable better ‘matches’ (albeit always provisional) between what we think about things and the way things are ...? And what are the implications of these revisings for understanding sign-making activities themselves and, indeed, for the very possibility of such sign-making activities at all?

The texture of everyday life looks like a loose knit, but it’s really a close weave. In fact the weave is so fine, so exquisitely and minutely wrought, that it can appear indifferent to us. But to catch that train I had to weave myself into it, become part of it: turning on the shower, boiling the kettle, calling the taxi, avoiding the traffic, arriving at the station ... Each and every act we perform depends on a network of actors and objects, exquisitely choreographed to the second. Everything we do depends on integrating with that living, pulsing ‘communicational infrastructure’ (Harris 1996) which our lives and life styles presuppose.

But what does integration itself involve? Integration is connection — and so, what is the basis, the ground, for connection? If I connect with a ball, in kicking it, or with you in shaking hands, what are the ‘conditions of possibility’ for this connection? If A and B connect (unlike ships that pass in the night) they must have something in common, some property or quality that they share which is the ground for their integration. Integrating my activities — with the ball, or with you — is certainly a real experience for me (and, in
the latter case, a real, though different, experience for you) but it is the experience of a connection with something that is not me. The reality of our sign making experiences, then, is a reality of connection, of being part of something else, something bigger. We may believe different things about it, and happily co-exist in our separate ‘realities’. But there are times when those beliefs just won’t help us connect or make sense of our connections, times when they are simply irrelevant to the biggest choices of our lives.

On that note, perhaps integrationism, therefore, sits quite comfortably within the realist philosophical tradition while, as Adrian shows, helping us to think more critically, and sometimes perhaps uncomfortably, about the ‘reality’ that we may think we know as well as about the limitations, oversimplifications, and downright misconceptions which afflict any philosophy which fails to embrace the creative sign-making activities of individuals as a fundamental component of human reality, and of human knowledge.

**Contact details:** P.E.Jones@shu.ac.uk

**References**