

***A Reply to Kasavin's 'Philosophical Realism'***  
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Ilya Kasavin's article (2015) explores the extent to which a generic social epistemology is, or can be made to be, compatible with some form of scientific realism. My plan in this review is to lay out what I take to be the main issues that appear when social epistemology is attacked by naïve realists, and to stitch this account on to Kasavin's own analysis. Kasavin's strategy is to give a comprehensive account of just what 'sociality' might be in the context of the debate about how far the sciences as bodies of knowledge are social constructions. There is little I would disagree with in his account. However, there is an omission from his account of realism which comes I think from identifying 'realism' with the doctrines of the Harvard philosophers, particularly Quine and Putnam.

According to Quine and Putnam, realism is a doctrine about propositions. However, in recent years we have come to see that realism must be a doctrine about practices—some propositional but, most importantly, some practical. Kasavin's various realisms seem to be variants on the propositional picture of science—knowing *that* rather than knowing *how*. Nevertheless, he does give an attractive account what the social aspect of science is and how this is more than merely compatible with some form of realism but essential to it.

The first step in my discussion will be to try to give an account of the main tenets of such a generic social epistemology. Epistemology, as the 'theory of knowledge', becomes social both in the matter of the inclusion of social analyses among the methods for the acquisition of knowledge, and in the matter of the inevitability or the mere happenchance of presence of social facts in the content of a body of knowledge.

The second step will be to do the same for scientific realism in both the sciences of matter and disciplined studies of human activities among which are the social and psychological sciences. This step is complicated because much that passes for social and psychological science is radically misconceived. So, to bring these two investigations together to assess Kasavin's discussion of the compatibility issue, we must step aside for a moment to refine the content of the debate. 'To conceive of such reality, another type of realism is needed—a realism based upon interdisciplinary dialogue of the social and human sciences that provides a picture of social reality' (Kasavin 2015, 3).

**The Spectrum of Social Epistemologies**

Social environments are unstable. If social influences on the assessment of the truth of propositions, and on beliefs about the world, are necessary ingredients in any and all bodies of belief, some of which might count as knowledge, social epistemology borders on relativism. If, by relativism, we simply mean that many workable views of parts of the world, and of human society, exist each of which reflects a facet of a complex reality revealed by different methods of enquiry, then this fact is no threat to a carefully delineated realism. But if such a multiplicity is interpreted to mean that all are arbitrary—and none have an overriding claim to anything but something like aesthetic or moral assessment—then social epistemology is a threat to realism however modest its claims to

know something about the world, and the people who inhabit it, independent of those people and their social arrangements and languages.

### **Why Naïve Realism is a Hopeless Position to Adopt**

The idea that the natural sciences describe the world as it exists, more or less independently of our relationship to it, runs into obvious problems to which there are solutions that are complex and many sided. Naïve realism can be questioned as follows: Can we determine the truth or falsity of descriptions of the material world as we experience it?

Not for sure. Such descriptions must use a vocabulary and choice of words that shapes the limits of perception. And general statements may seem to be true so far but there can be no guarantees that experience may that it will not always be so. Here, the parallel between the rules and conventions that are responsible for regularities in social phenomena in this or that society, and are the grounds for a restricted realist interpretation of bodies of knowledge of such conventions and laws of material nature, breaks down.

We must assume that social rules will change and that the languages in which they are expressed are not permanent. However, we must also assume that the basic laws of nature are permanent—the transformative character of geology in which each planet is different, and biology where the conditions for life have been realized only on this earth, are nevertheless rooted in universal laws of physics but in complicated and environmentally relative ways. Can we determine the truth or falsity of descriptions of states and processes that are suggested by theory but are not perceivable? To answer this question raises a great many issues such as the role of models and analogies in scientific thinking, the importance of manipulability of unperceivable entities as processes, and so on. Ruling out such assessment on the grounds of the imperceptibility of what we purport to describe is naïve.

Kasavin's 'fall guy' Paul Boghossian seems, in the remarks that are quoted, to have missed the heart of the debate. Can an account of scientific realism have any value that completely omits the key dimension of theory guided manipulation of the world not only as we can touch, see, taste and feel it, but also as we can imagine it? Remember that culture shapes, in part, what it is permitted to manipulate! For example, testing the efficacy of the treatment for a disease is limited by ethical; that is, social considerations. Recall the medieval prohibition on the dissection of human bodies, and so on. Kasavin mentions Harré (1986) on practical realism, but not Hacking (1983) on 'intervening'; that is, manipulation and its results. So, Kasavin's criticism of Boghossian, and his like, is a bird with a broken wing.

### **The Spectrum of Realisms**

Broadly speaking, there are realist accounts of the natural sciences based on the idea that the positions of theories can be known to be true or false in much the same way as the experientially based propositions that are used to report the phenomena of the laboratory

or the observations of the world around us. The anti-realist has to argue that there are indefinitely many theories from which descriptions of the same evidential facts can be deduced with the help of knowledge of local conditions. The realist has to argue that plausible theories are the best we can do and that depends on how actual theories are based on models drawn from practical and experiential knowledge. It is hopeless to try to base a defense of realism on truth and falsity as obtainable ideals—it is tested on plausibility and implausibility and the history of the success of plausible theories in promoting further research.

### **What is it that Scientists Explore?**

The great Estonian biologist Jakob von Uexküll introduced a distinction between the *Welt*, the great wide world in general, and the many *Umwelten*, those parts of the *Welt* that can be lived in and exploited by each species of animal and plant. Human beings have step by step, but at different rates at different times and by different means, extended the human *Umwelt*. In both enlarging and deepening our *Umwelt*, humans deleted imaginary beings from our conception of the *Welt*. Any account of scientific realism must take account of this distinction. The content of the *Welt* is an intellectual construction, but it is essential to the guidance of that ever-present question for the successful scientists: what shall we do next?

In human studies, including social and psychological sciences, research may shrink, as often as it enlarges, the human *Umwelten*. There may be social worlds we are forbidden to enter be it the Islamic State or medieval Japan. But what is the *Welt* in this case? It is the total human conversation, past and present (with hints of the future), through which we interact to make sense of our lives, and the lives of others, primarily by the manipulation of symbols.

We can discern a region of overlap between practical realisms with a weaker notion of knowledge than that of true propositions, and anti-realisms that recognize the epistemological force of material practices—particularly that of manipulations of hypothetical states and entities. This overlap is seen in both interpretations of the natural sciences and in the realm of human studies such as psychology, linguistics, theology and the law—where their knowledge base of disciplined enquiry that, like science, attempts to hit a moving target. As Kasavin states:

Positively conceived, sociality consists of cultural and intellectual resources, political needs and technical stimuli that form the basic structure of the knowing agent and, thus, are essential for the acquisition and legitimation of knowledge. The knowing agent is taken as a person, or group, equipped with cultivated cognitive abilities and competences—curiosity, creativity, discursive ability, skills and habits, common knowledge and various experiences, common views, and patterns of activity and interaction (3).

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## References

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