

Vicissitudes of Reality

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Abstract

'Real' and 'really' are deflated and minimized in parallel to the minimalist and deflationary treatment of truth. J.L. Austin's insightful comment that with 'real': 'The negative wears the trousers' is elucidated and developed. There follows a discussion of the bearing of the point on Plato's claims about knowledge, belief and ignorance. It is maintained that it is implausible to hope that acquaintance with a Form for various Fs is going to provide complete knowledge of the wardrobe of Austinian trousers, especially inasmuch as that wardrobe grows and changes with the vicissitudes of socio-industrial-commercial-technological life.

Truth has been – not without controversy – deflated or minimized by the claim that:

P is true if and only if P

says all that needs to be said about what truth consists in. There is no more and no less to asserting that a proposition is true than there is to asserting the proposition. Deflation suggests as a riposte to those who claim to find difficulties or need deeper understanding (or what?) with regard to truth: *Look here! You cannot have a difficulty about truth unless you have a difficulty about what it is to assert something. And then you must have a difficulty about what it is to ask something, or even to suggest anything. And as John McEnroe often said to tennis referees: You can't be serious!*

Truth and reality are sufficiently cousinly that it is plausible to deflate and minimize reality in parallel fashion by holding that:

x is a real F if and only if x is F

For linguistic reasons, one might want to put this more clumsily, by:

x is (a real) (real) (really) F if and only if x is F

In English this is because of the differences among a duck, silk, and stumbling. The nuance that needs to be observed can be left to the reader. In English we exploit all three indicated ways of countering a claim that something is a decoy, synthetic, or mimed. There are languages, ancient Greek one, Arabic another, with no indefinite article. Moreover, I am told, Greek does not have the subtleties of adjective v. adverb. Donald Davidson, some years ago, provided reason to treat adverbs as adjectives, as adjectives modifying terms for events.

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Nuances aside, the gist is that, as J.L. Austin said more years ago, with 'real' the negative 'wears the trousers'; which means, as suggested, that to say something is a real F, really F or really Fing is not to attribute any quality to an item which the term replacing F hasn't already provided; rather it is to deny that something in question is a toy or a decoy, synthetic or artificial, bravado or rashness, miming or pretense, etc.

Negative trousers come in different styles; they are tailored differently depending on x; not all ways of being 'not a real', 'not real' or 'not really' are comfortable on the same legs. Austin noted that while he could find a toy stove and a toy frying pan for his daughter, he could hardly have found toy gas for the toy stove. When it is claimed or suggested that some item is dubious as to its reality, one may just say it is not real F, not really an F, or not really F, but typically we go in for styles of trousers. Here is a list; it can be left to the reader to note the variations of nouns that can fill the blanks: illusory____ synthetic____ artificial____ false____ fake____ toy____ decoy____ counterfeit____ mimed____ pretending to be____ only looks like____ stuffed____ bogus____ masquerading as____ phony____ forged____ simulacrum of____ simulates____ imitation____ illusion of____ after-image of____ holograph of____ picture of____ statue of____ imaginary____ step_____.

There are more complex cases, but the point about the negative holds: George Gershwin died of a brain tumor, which led him to think he was smelling rubber burning. So not really rubber burning, but a brain tumor. Here, and with perception generally, we need to distinguish between two uses of 'of'. Gershwin experienced the odor of rubber burning, but not an odor due to rubber burning. Here 'of' introduces words for the quality of the odor; it does not causally link the odor to anything, rather it is here causal and there characterizing content. The considerations noted here about 'odor' ('smell') apply similarly when we look at 'taste', 'sound', 'feel' and 'sight' (or 'look' or 'appearance').

It is amusing to construct contrasts: a stuffed duck and a counterfeit coin, but not a stuffed coin and a counterfeit duck; a false lover and a forged Picasso, but not a forged lover and a false Picasso, a doll house and false teeth, but not doll teeth and a false house, false pride and a tin soldier, but not tin pride and a false soldier. My favorite here, since recently acquiring one, is a stepgranddaughter and a forged dollar; but not a forged granddaughter and a stepdollar. Reality is not yet that vicissitudinous, though – and this is my general line of thought – we cannot be rule out that nature and

human practice will bring happiness to these currently unhappy expressions.

It should also be noticed that there are cases where that which solicits us to call it courage, generosity, or loyalty but is not really such, involves a distinctive word or phrase: ‘foolhardy’, ‘purchasing of affection’ or ‘servility’. As Aristotle recognized, some traits of character gain in repugnancy by masquerading as virtues. In the *Gorgias*, Plato draws attention to the contrast between medicine and quackery; quackery he suggests, is – as I like to gloss him – a perverse of medicine. Practical wisdom includes the ability to see that and when conduct is a virtuous mean between two non-virtuous extremes. An extreme can appear to be virtuous; the outward behavior of foolhardiness may resemble courage; the outward behavior of servility may resemble loyalty. Servility is a perverse of loyalty.

Rebutting someone’s claim made with such words and phrases can be done, and mostly is done, here and where we have just been, by saying that the item in question is a real F, really is F-ing, or is real F. But such rebuttal can just as well be achieved by simply saying: ‘You’re mistaken; it *is* F’. Emphasis or not, ‘is’ does the job. That is the minimalist claim.

So far, I have attended to uses where ‘real’ is used to rebut claims of failure of some item in some way to be F; and we have seen how that use does not attribute any quality to the item. I now look at cases where ‘real’ appears to qualify being F by claiming ideality or perfection for the F in question. These cases depend on emphasis being put somewhere in the sentences involved. Without the emphasis, the sentences appear only to be rebuttals of the kind already discussed. So consider:

THAT is a real woman.
That IS a real woman.
That is a WOMAN.

or:

THAT is a real martini.
That IS a real martini.
That is a MARTINI.

The word ‘real’ is simply not needed for these, shall I say Hemingwayesque exclamations. Surely further support, not difficulty, for minimalism.

A further point to be made about exclamatory expressions such as those just mentioned is particularly interesting. There lies in art a field where ideality and perfection thrive. I once watched Marcel

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Marceau miming the travails and frustrations of a man playing pinball. Only Marceau was there on the stage with a spotlight. But there could be no doubt what he was miming.

I could not avoid the thought: 'Now THAT is playing pinball!' and 'THAT is frustration'. Of course it wasn't really. Rather than refuting my view on the matter, however, it seems a kind of support for it. Art, in all its forms, has moments of glory when we respond as I have indicated. Maybe Plato's ban on artists was in part due to the artist seemingly being able to compete with the geometer or the philosopher in gaining access to the Forms.

I turn now to more of what I think is the relevance of all this to Plato's theory of Forms and of what knowledge of them consists in. I focus on a passage in *Republic* (Book V, 479b-479c) where, I am going to suggest, Plato (via Socrates of course) seems to me to fall into error about what and how much is known or can be known by knowing the Forms. His error is, I shall suggest, an (if not *the*) error hounded by Wittgenstein in his later work. The connection with the first part of this discussion lies in Book V where, when speaking of knowledge, belief and ignorance, Socrates turns to a popular riddle and its answer. The riddle:

A man not a man throws a stone not a stone at a bird not a bird sitting on a branch not a branch.

Answer:

A eunuch throws a piece of pumice at a bat sitting on a rafter.

The riddle is exploited in elucidation of belief in contrast to knowledge and ignorance. Knowledge is of the Forms and to have knowledge is to

Know what it is to be (an) F

The model seems to be geometry, where The Sphere in no way deviates from perfect Sphericity, doesn't a bit drift toward the ovoid. Everyday spheres – marbles, globes, billiard balls – cannot be perfectly spherical, will be only to some extent so and to some extent not. And the same goes for any general term.

Everyday things: men, stones, bats and branches, all have their ways of failing to be unqualifiedly, undeviatingly, what we roughly take them for. Eunuchs, pieces of pumice, bats and rafters are all instances of not really being what they can, more or less easily, be taken for. Using the Platonic notion of participation, we might say that everyday Fs are more or less, but never fully F. Knowledge of what it is to be an F will provide the knower with the ability to spot

manners of appearing F for any F where he has grasped what it is (really and fully) to be an F. This knowledge, to link the discussion further to the first part of this paper, will also provide the ability to tell what varying styles of trousers everyday things can walk in when they (more or less trickily) are other than what they appear to be or can be taken for.

To put the matter otherwise, Plato may be said to be holding that if you know what it is to be F, you will be in position to recognize the various ways things other than Fs may be taken for Fs, and so in position to spot what is deviantly or not fully and properly F. A knower of what it is to be F will be able to cope with the vicissitudes of worldly encounters and experiences of Fs and their (more or less) fraudulent or deviant companions. Belief, we may say, is the ability to spot F-ness but without full confidence that any given instance is not devious in some way. Ignorance then, we may suppose, is having no idea whatsoever regarding F-ness.

But this has only to be suggested to provoke the question: how could there be such knowledge given the vicissitudes of nature and socio/industrial life? Nature gave us two significantly different stuffs we call 'jade', nephrite and jadeite. So 'jade,' from starting life as a decent natural kind term slips into specifying only a cluster of qualities. Someone might have insisted that nephrite was 'fool's jade', but things turned out otherwise. Social life provides us generosity and, especially with capitalism, incredible philanthropy. The latter is of course problematic as to whether it is really generosity as opposed to buying favor or atoning for the sins of exploitation, or some other perverse.

Industry is more prolific in this dimension, as can be seen by noting words such as 'synthetic', 'artificial', 'toy', 'plastic', all indicating novel ways of failing to be something or other. Nature and culture collaborate to give us cases like 'vegetable' and 'fruit' which, because they have both culinary and botanical uses, yield up an issue as to whether a tomato is really a vegetable or a fruit, not to mention artichokes, which are the buds of flowers and so not vegetables. If, however, the context is the ancient radio show '20 Questions' with its triad of Animal, Mineral, Vegetable, then a flower is vegetable. There is no need to resolve this issue or, for that matter, to resolve the issue as to whether it deserves to be an issue.

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