

Non-Descriptive Realism

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In this paper I will explicate a species of realism that I call *Non-Descriptive Realism*.

Basically, it is conceptual relativism combined with holistic realism. The first component of this view, *conceptual relativism*, states that there are multiple conceptual schemes; some better, some worse, some that are empirically equivalent, some that are commensurable with others, and some that are incommensurable, but *none* that describe the way the world is in itself. The second component, *holistic realism*, is realism about the world as a whole, and that there is just one way the world is in itself. I call this type of realism “non-descriptive” because even though there is just one way the world is, there are multiple ways of describing it, and these ways of describing depend on one’s conceptual scheme. Thus while I maintain that there is just one way the world is in itself, the only description one can give of the world in itself is that everything just is as it *is*. Of course, descriptions should be useful or in some sense meaningful, but this description of reality seems utterly pointless and trivial. One of my tasks, therefore, will be to elucidate how it is meaningful to be a realist in this sense, over and above the “good feeling” one gets from being a realist. Motivating this view is an easy task; there is something obviously right about relativism, and there is something obviously right about realism, so the impetus behind attempting to reconcile these apparently mutually-inconsistent views should be quite evident, though the goal is seemingly impossible. The difficult part will be developing a view in which they are reconcilable, so I will begin by arguing for and further describing this view, whereupon I will compare and contrast it with a view put forth by John Searle, which is quite similar to my own. Along the way I will be providing content for a substantial concept of reality that allows us

to understand the world *as* a thing in itself, but one that nevertheless fails to provide a description of the world as it *is* in itself.¹

The Argument for Conceptual Relativism

Arguments for relativism typically proceed from the recognition that our concepts are relative, to the conclusion that there are no observer-independent *facts* about the world. I accept the conclusion but qualify it in such a way that it is consistent with there being a single *way* the world is in itself. Here is the basic outline of my argument for conceptual relativism:

1. Our experience of the world is relative to our conceptual scheme.
2. Our theories about the world are relative to our conceptual scheme.
3. There is no single conceptual scheme that can be said to correspond to the world in itself.
4. Descriptions (both experiential and theoretical) are relative to our conceptual scheme.
5. Therefore, we can neither conceive nor describe the world as it is in itself.

The first premise states that our experience of the world is relative to our conceptual scheme², and there are two parts to this: perceptual and categorical. It is uncontroversial that our perceptual experience of the world is relative, since it is accidental that we divide up the spectrum of light in the way we do, and that we parse sound waves in the way we do, etc. In short, all of our perceptual concepts are arbitrary – other sentient beings do it quite differently. In fact, some other creatures have completely different sense modalities, such as echolocation. The categorical aspect is more contentious, however. Not to oversimplify, but a basic model of how we carve up the world categorically is into entities and events that are spatio-temporally ordered

¹ One preliminary remark on this concept of reality that I will be developing: I very much dislike talk of an “external world” – as if there were myself and, *perhaps* an external world, when really there is just the world, which includes myself.

² In the end I think that our individual conceptual schemes are much more nuanced and idiosyncratic than I am letting on, but there is enough agreement among us that such considerations needn’t concern us here.

and engaged in causal relations with one another. But I can see no good reason why it couldn't be done differently, other than the fact that I am unable to conceive or imagine what that way could be. Kant, for example, thought that there was only one possible way of doing this; that there were certain preconditions of experience such that in order to experience the world, it must be experienced in this particular way. But this is just the way *we* experience the world, and it seems highly speculative and anthropocentric to claim that this is the *only* way in which the world *could* be experienced. Of course, it is quite natural to think such, since we can't imagine any other way of experiencing the world, because our cognitive apparatus functions in this way and no other. But that doesn't mean it is impossible that some other sentient beings might do it in radically different ways – ways that we can neither conceive of nor imagine. This, I think, is where Kant went wrong; but I am unaware of any argument that can establish that he *was* wrong. I am tempted, for example, to make the following conceivability argument: it is conceivable that there are other sentient beings (e.g. aliens) that employ a different categorical conceptual scheme, so it is metaphysically possible. Therefore, our categorical conceptual scheme is arbitrary. But such an argument won't work on certain interpretations of conceivability, so I will refrain from making it. I am also tempted to make the following skeptical argument: we don't *know* that there are not other possible categorical conceptual schemes, so for all we know there *are* other possible categorical conceptual schemes. Therefore, we are unjustified in maintaining that our categorical conceptual scheme is the only one possible, and must accept that it is arbitrary. But I won't make that argument either, because I don't hold unobtainable standards of justification. I could also make an argument from analogy: It is possible that other sentient beings employ radically different *perceptual* conceptual schemes, because some do in fact do so (e.g. echolocation). So it is possible that other sentient beings employ radically different

categorical conceptual schemes. Therefore, our categorical conceptual schemes are arbitrary. But the analogy is too weak, so I will refrain from making it. Nevertheless, there is a weaker version of this thesis that I *can* argue for, and it is quite sufficient for the brand of conceptual relativism that I am espousing.

Suppose that the categorical conceptual scheme that we employ is the only one possible, and that it is a precondition for experience. Even so, it is still the case that the particular way in which we carve the world up into entities and events is arbitrary, just as it is arbitrary that we divide the spectrum of light in the way we do. Some of the entities we refer to are conglomerates of other entities that are not physically bound to one another (e.g. a forest). When we see, for example, a large quantity of trees in close proximity to one another, we tend to conceive of them as a single entity: a forest. But couldn't it be the case that some other sentient beings didn't perceive things in that way; that all they would see are individual trees in close proximity to one another? That we do in fact see them as a single entity seems to depend on our cognitive apparatus, and if so it is arbitrary. Nevertheless, anyone who ascribes to a supervenience thesis is sure to object that the forest is a *real* entity, albeit one that supervenes on the individual trees, but such an objection begs the question. What is meant by "real" here? The way the world really is, or the way we perceive it to be? I do not deny the utility of conceiving of a bunch of trees as a forest, in which we subsume the interactions among the individual trees. Furthermore, I do not deny that the utility of such a concept depends on the way the world is in itself (although I anticipate). But if one is going to simply *stipulate* that this is the way the world *really is*, then there is nothing more to say.

Another way in which we carve up the world is into entities that are physically bound to other entities in a part/whole relationship (e.g. leaves and trees). One class of explanations of

how we do this are the various theories of shape-based object representation (e.g. Biederman 1987). The basic thesis of these views is that we recognize objects by first decomposing them into parts according to certain perceptible features of those objects, and then classify them according to their part/whole relations. But these theories operate, as all scientific theories must, on the assumption of naïve realism: that there are observer-independent objects out there with objective features by which they are *recognized*. And it is true that in my everyday life I act as though this is the way the world is, but that is because this is the way the world is for me – as a philosopher I recognize that this is not the way the world is in itself. One might wonder: In what sense is the object being “recognized” an objective entity? Is it that we are all in agreement regarding the entities we perceive? Of course we are in agreement, since we are employing the same conceptual scheme, but couldn’t there be other sentient beings with other conceptual schemes who would carve up the world differently? Would they be in agreement with us? Our very language *seems* to presuppose that which is in question (i.e. that there is something there to be recognized). But in order to recognize (or as I prefer to put it, to *categorize*) an object, it must be decomposed into parts by our perceptual apparatus. And it seems to me that this is how we parse the *whole* of our perceptual field into individual objects. We parse our field of vision into entities based on features of the *whole* of our field of vision, and in turn categorize those entities according to their features. I do not see the whole of my field of vision as a single entity because it is being parsed into individual parts, but the features of those entities are really just features of the whole. And each of these individual parts is categorized by further being decomposed into parts, until I reach certain simple parts (e.g. geons). Of course, this isn’t a conscious activity on my part, but a result of my perceptual mechanisms. And this isn’t the whole story either, as certain non-visual perceptual discriminations play a role in this process. But the point is this: I

am parsing the whole of my field of vision into entities based on certain perceived characteristics of the whole of my field of vision. The choice of *which* characteristics to use is not mine; it is “hard-wired” into my cognitive apparatus. I can imagine some other entity doing it very differently, and this means that the way in which I parse the world is arbitrary. Furthermore, it seems quite possible that the very characteristics that I perceive, and by which I categorize the world, are every bit as relative to my conceptual scheme as anything else.

I could go on at great length, but I hope that I have made the point sufficiently clear in this all too brief discussion. The way in which we carve up the world into entities is arbitrary, and other sentient beings could do it in radically different ways. Again, I do not diminish the utility of our way of doing it, for it is quite useful to us. Of course, the obvious objection is that we do it this way because it is useful, and it is useful because the world really is that way. But this objection again begs the question. I see no reason why other ways of carving up the world, although being entirely arbitrary, couldn't be just as useful (or perhaps even more useful), just so long as it was done in a consistent manner. And I see no reason to think that the way we do it is somehow the best possible way, or the way that “corresponds” to the way the world is in itself. To stamp one's foot and maintain that this just is the way the world is in itself is not to provide an argument for that assertion. And “plausibility considerations” do no better – *of course* the way we do it seems most plausible to us, because that is the way we do it, and we are cognitively incapable of imagining any other way, because our cognitive apparatus functions in this way and no other. So even on the supposition that sentient beings *must* employ the categorical concepts of entities, events, etc., there are innumerable ways in which the world can be so carved up. Therefore, the way in which we carve up the world into entities is arbitrary. And this argument strengthens the argument from analogy that I mentioned above, that other sentient beings could

employ radically different categorical conceptual schemes. There are two aspects to a perceptual conceptual scheme: sense modalities, and the way in which the data of those modalities are parsed; both are arbitrary. Similarly, there are two aspects of categorical conceptual schemes: the categories, and the way in which the data of those categories are parsed; the latter is arbitrary, so the former is probably arbitrary as well. However, as I noted above, the weaker claim will suffice. I will leave it up to the reader's considered opinion whether or not it is possible that other sentient beings could employ radically different categorical conceptual schemes. In either case our experience of the world is relative to our conceptual scheme.

The second premise of my argument for conceptual relativism states that our theories about the world are relative to our conceptual scheme, and follows immediately from the first. All of the theories of the higher-level sciences depend on the particular way in which we carve up the world into entities, because they express relations that obtain *between* those entities. We couldn't have our science of ecology, for example, unless we first carved up the world into forests, lakes, etc. As for the lower-level sciences (e.g. physics and chemistry), there are two ways the argument could proceed. The strong version of categorical conceptual relativism entails that the theories of the lower-level sciences depend on our categorical conceptual scheme, since our categorical conception of the world is going to have everything to do with the types of explanations we make about what we observe. But another way to go is to simply make a distinction between observable and theoretical entities. It follows from the first premise that observable entities are relative to our conceptual scheme, whereas theoretical entities may or may not be. But the only conceptual access we have to theoretical entities is through the *observable consequences* of our theories, and the *theoretical descriptions* of those entities. And it seems quite obvious (given what has been said thus far) that the theoretical entities we postulate,

and the theoretical descriptions we give of them, depend on the particular way in which we parse the data of our categorical conceptual scheme. Nevertheless, one might maintain that, while the initial course of our scientific inquiries is dependent on our conceptual schemes, science converges toward objective truth. But this truth must be expressed in some intelligible form, and what is intelligible on one conceptual scheme will be unintelligible on another. The point is that there are many ways to conceive of and describe the world, but no one way has any special “preferred” status. Our scientific theories are not converging toward one truth, but rather *a* truth – one that is meant to provide an explanation for the observations *we* make. And the observations we make are relative to our conceptual scheme. Other entities with different conceptual schemes would probably have scientific theories that are quite unlike our own. For example, what would bat physics be like? Presumably it would be meant to explain their echo-observations, and so would differ quite markedly from our own. There could be even more radical differences between our theories and those of some alien race. Thus, our theories about the world are relative to our conceptual scheme.

The third premise states that there is no single conceptual scheme that can be said to correspond to the world in itself, and the preceding considerations are sufficient to establish this. I have argued that there is no preferred conceptual scheme, but rather many possible conceptual schemes, each being unintelligible in terms of the others (i.e. incommensurable). But the realist supposition is that there is one way the world is in itself. Most conceptual relativists simply deny this concept of reality, and they are free to do so; the burden is on me to explain how it is useful and meaningful to be a realist in this sense. I will turn to this shortly, but the point is that, if one accepts conceptual relativism and holistic realism, no one conceptual scheme can be said to correspond to the way the world is in itself, since one would have to say that many different and

incommensurable conceptual schemes all describe the world the way it is in itself, which is not possible. So in either case, if one accepts conceptual relativism, one must accept that no conceptual scheme can be said to correspond to the way the world is in itself.

The fourth premise states that descriptions (both experiential and theoretical) are relative to our conceptual scheme. A description is, on my view, a symbolic representation meant to activate or otherwise cause us to employ certain concepts in a cognitive process. If I say, for example, that the moon orbits around the earth, you employ your concepts of the moon, the earth, and orbiting. You might even form a mental picture of this using your perceptual apparatus, or you might process this information into a statement about this relationship. But what if I said the same thing to some alien being that has a different conceptual scheme than we do? I think it quite obvious that my description would be unintelligible to such a being, because it is meant to be understood by those who have the same conceptual scheme as I, or at least one that is commensurable with mine. And this point isn't about language; the possibility of translating one language into another *presupposes* commensurability of conceptual schemes. This goes not only for simple descriptions of experience (e.g. the sky is blue), but for theoretical descriptions as well; Newton's *Principia* would make absolutely no sense whatsoever to an alien being with a different conceptual scheme. Thus descriptions can no more be said to correspond to the way the world is in itself than conceptual schemes can, since one would have to say that multiple incommensurable descriptions of the world all describe the way the world is in itself, which is not possible. This brings us to the conclusion of my argument for conceptual relativism: that we can neither conceive nor describe the world as it is in itself. This conclusion is the same on both the strong and the weak theses of categorical conceptual relativism, although it is more radical on the former than the latter.

The Argument for Holistic Realism

The conclusion of the above argument does not entail that there is no observer-independent reality, although it comes very close. One could develop a Berkeleyan style argument to the effect that, since all we have are our concepts, and concepts are all in the mind, it's *all* in the mind, and there is no observer-independent reality, which is solipsism. Or one could take a Kantian route and point out that, since our only method of understanding anything is in terms of our conceptual scheme, we cannot even conceive of any such thing as an observer-independent reality. Recognizing these points, there are two theses I maintain that must be made explicit: first, that we can only understand things in terms of our conceptual scheme, and second, that we can have a substantive concept of the world as a thing in itself. The first is something that I have argued for, and the second is something that remains to be fleshed out. Before I can do that, however, I need to argue that there *is* something that needs fleshing out. The argument for holistic realism is quite straightforward:

1. The intentional content of a statement is relative to a conceptual scheme.
2. In addition to intentional content, some statements have factual content.
3. The factual content of a statement is not relative to a conceptual scheme.
4. There is something independent of (i.e. not relative to) our conceptual scheme that fixes the factual content of intentional statements.

The first premise for this argument follows from my argument for conceptual relativism. A statement is a description, and descriptions are only intelligible on the conceptual scheme for which they are intended. Thus, the intentional content of a statement is relative to a conceptual scheme. But not all statements are created equal, which brings us to the second premise.

The second premise states that in addition to intentional content, some statements have factual content. For while some statements consist of pure intentional content, and are therefore conceptual truths (e.g. “bachelors are unmarried males”), other statements have *additional* content that does not depend on our conceptual scheme (e.g. “the sky is blue”). There is nothing over and above my conceptual scheme that is needed to explain a conceptual truth, but I am at a loss to explain contingent truths solely in terms of my conceptual scheme. Consider that the statement ‘the sky is green’ is perfectly intelligible on my conceptual scheme, while being completely false. This additional content of certain statements, over and above the intentional content, is what I call the *factual content* of a statement. And while a conceptual scheme is arbitrary, and the intentional content is therefore relative, it seems as though the factual content of statements is neither relative nor arbitrary.

The third premise states that the factual content of a statement is not relative to a conceptual scheme. In support of this claim one need only consider experience. There are innumerable statements that are perfectly intelligible on my conceptual scheme that are nevertheless contradicted by experience, and why should that be? Why is it the case that the ‘the sky is blue’ is true, whereas ‘the sky is green’ is false? Try as I may, I can find no conceptual difference between these two statements. Now, one could adopt a sort of Quinean view³, where ‘the sky is blue’ is true by consensus, and the term ‘blue’ just refers to the set of things that have been stipulated as such. But this view seems to put the cart before the horse, and just plain gets things wrong. Even if this view were true, it would be unable to explain the case where two or more beings, employing the same conceptual scheme, were able to agree on the factual content of a description of a novel experience. For example, if you and I happened upon some hitherto undiscovered object (call it ‘x’), we would develop our own individual conceptions of it (i.e. that

³ I am not saying that this *is* Quine’s view, although it may be.

“ x is green”) but would nevertheless be in complete agreement, even prior to ever discussing x , and thus prior to being able to establish a consensus about x . The reason that we would agree, prior to being able to reach any sort of consensus, is that our categorical conceptual schemes both discriminate an object x , and our perceptual conceptual schemes provide us with data about x 's greenness, and this would all be in agreement *prior to* our communicating to one another any sort of description of x . But this Quinean view would be unable to explain how it is that our individual data about x is in agreement. So what makes it the case that we are in agreement prior to communicating? If I am to say anything here, I can only say that it is the world in itself, which brings us to the conclusion of this argument.

The conclusion of this argument is that there is something independent of (i.e. not relative to) our conceptual scheme that fixes the factual content of intentional statements, and this follows since the factual content of contingent statements is in fact fixed in a non-arbitrary manner. The big question here is, *what could this something be?* I certainly don't want to postulate anything unnecessarily, but this argument has ruled out the possibility that it is fixed by our conceptual scheme. A Berkeleyan would say that it is *God* who fixes the factual content of contingent statements, and I won't argue against such a view here, although I find it utterly unacceptable. The only other possibility that I can think of is that this factual content is fixed by *the world in itself*. But here a great deal of caution is called for. I am tempted to say, for example, that the factual content of the statement ‘ x is green’ is fixed by x as a thing in itself, but that would not be consistent with the conceptual relativism that I argued for, *because there is no x in itself*. The entity x is just a discrimination made by my cognitive apparatus; in fact the statement ‘ x exists’ is a contingent statement whose factual content is fixed by the world in itself. And that is why this version of realism is holistic, since there are no “parts” of the world that can be

referred to as things in themselves. When I experience the world, my experience is structured according to my conceptual scheme, and is therefore relative to it. But while my conceptual scheme is arbitrary, there are certain facts that are non-arbitrarily fixed by the way the world is in itself, independent of my conceptual scheme.

Further Description of this View

By now the reader should have a pretty good feel for the view I am developing, but there are several points that need to be made clear. The first is what I mean by “the world”, or rather what I *don't* mean. The world is not a logical construction out of sense-data, a framework of statements, a social construction, a conceptual scheme, etc. The world is none of these things. Nor am I saying that there are appearances, and that the world is something *behind* the appearances; and I certainly am not saying that there are *only* appearances. What you observe is the world, the *real* world, but the way in which you observe it is relative to your conceptual scheme. This is not an error-theory; we are not wrong, for example, when we say that “the sky is blue”. In this statement the concepts “the sky” and “blue” have a particular conceptual relationship, and relative to our conceptual scheme, the statement has intentional content. But once the intentional content is fixed by our conceptual scheme, the sky *is* blue. And the reason why the sky is blue is the way the world is in itself. Without there being a way the world is in itself, any conceptual scheme would be just as good as any other, and there would be no truth or falsity to contingent statements – ‘the sky is blue’ would be equivalent to ‘the king of France is bald’. So the world is simply a thing in itself that we observe and that fixes the truth value of contingent statements, but since conceptual schemes do not correspond to the world, there is a lot of “slip and grip” in the truth value of contingent statements. There are cases where we don't

know how to evaluate the truth value of a contingent statement. We can imagine a case, for example, where we don't know whether to say that it is raining or not; perhaps we would just say it is drizzling. The point is that our concepts don't need to correspond to the world in order to be useful, just so long as we are able to describe the world in a way that is meaningful.

More needs to be said, however, about how conceptual schemes "fit" the world. A conceptual truth is something that can never be contradicted by experience, and a conceptual falsehood is something that can never be validated. But while these do not correspond to the world, they can be said to "fit" if we find instances where they can be applied to it. There is a difference, for example, between the statements 'bachelors are unmarried' and 'the king of France is a monarch'. The former is applicable to certain entities in the world as we perceive it, whereas the latter is not. Likewise, there is a difference between the statements 'the sky is blue' and 'the king of France is bald'. Both statements appear to have factual content, but while the former does, the latter does not. The typical realist explanation is that 'the sky' refers or corresponds to a "real" entity while 'the kind of France' does not. This is not so on my view, although it is true that there are circumstances in which we can apply the former to our experience of the world, whereas there are no such circumstances for the latter. What we want to understand is the relationship between a conceptual scheme and the world, but we find ourselves lacking the necessary conceptual resources. The best we can say is that truth and reference are what happens when our conceptual scheme meets up with the world in experience.

Our conception of the world is as something independent of our concepts, and so we find that our concept of it is lacking any substantive content. But that is not entirely correct, for we have a concept of ourselves, our conceptual scheme, and the world as a thing in itself that fixes truth and reference. And while this simple picture is complicated somewhat by the fact that we

are part of the world as we conceive it, but not the world as it is in itself, we can still gain some sort of understanding of this process. The goal is to see how all this fits together, and whether it is meaningful or useful to have a concept of the world as a thing in itself. I claim that it is. For while this concept of the world as a thing in itself is nevertheless *just* a concept, and thus does not correspond to anything, it *does* play a substantial role in our conceptual framework, and that's as real as it gets.

Contrast with Searle's View

It will be helpful at this point to distinguish my view from one put forth by John Searle which, like my view, is an attempted reconciliation of conceptual relativism and realism. Searle says that "... conceptual relativism seems completely true, indeed, platitudinous. However, several philosophers have supposed that it is inconsistent with external realism, and consequently, that if we accept conceptual relativism, we are forced to deny realism." (161) And Searle (like myself) does not think that conceptual relativism is inconsistent with realism: "... the real world does not care how we describe it and it remains the same under the various different descriptions we give of it." (163) Nevertheless, there does appear to be a certain inconsistency in his view. On the one hand Searle says:

Realism is the view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations. Realism does not say how things are but only that there is a way that they are. And "things" in the previous two sentences does not mean material objects or even objects. It is, like the "it" in "It is raining," not a referring expression. (155)

But on the other hand he says:

Mount Everest exists independently of how or whether I or anyone else ever represented it or anything else. Furthermore, there are many features of Mount Everest ... which would have remained totally unaffected if no one had ever represented them in any fashion. (153)

The first quote seems to imply that our terms do not refer to things in themselves, but in the second he seems to be taking himself to be referring to a thing in itself (i.e. Mount Everest), so evidently there is something very different between his view and my own. Searle says that all of the anti-realist arguments from conceptual relativism "... are designed to show that different conceptual systems will generate different and apparently inconsistent descriptions of the same 'reality.' As far as I can see there is nothing in any of them that is inconsistent with external realism." (163) Thus far I agree, but he goes on to say that "The appearance of inconsistency is an illusion and, on a natural interpretation of these views, there is no inconsistency whatever in accepting the most naïve version of realism, and accepting any version at all of conceptual relativism." (163-164) And with this I must disagree, for my version of conceptual relativism simply does not allow for the sort of naïve realism that Searle envisions.

The question is whether it is just *my* version of conceptual relativism that disallows naïve realism, and if so what exactly the difference is between my view and Searle's, or whether there is a genuine inconsistency in Searle's view. In the following passage, Searle seems to imply that he accepts (at the very least) the weak thesis of categorical conceptual relativism:

The idea of conceptual relativity is an old and, I believe, a correct one. Any system of classification or individuation of objects, any set of categories for describing the world, indeed, any system of representation at all is conventional, and to that extent arbitrary. *The world divides up the way we divide it*, and if we are ever inclined to think that our present way of dividing it is the right one, or is somehow inevitable, we can always imagine alternative systems of classification. (160; *emphasis mine*)

But even the weak thesis of categorical conceptual relativism entails that the entities to which we refer are not things in themselves, nor do they correspond to things in themselves, which is why the form of realism I espouse is holistic. There simply are no parts of the world in itself to which I can refer; therefore there are no parts of the world in itself toward which I can adopt a realist attitude. Nevertheless, Searle seems to want something *more* than holistic realism.

Searle seems to take the way in which our conceptual scheme carves up the world far too seriously, and this leads him to suppose that the objects to which he refers are *both* conceptual entities and objects in themselves as parts of the world in itself. I am not quite sure how this is supposed to work, given the arbitrariness of the way in which we carve up the world. Perhaps Searle thinks that while different conceptual schemes carve up the world differently, any respectable conceptual scheme must carve it up *neatly*. Now many philosophers have thought that there is a certain degree of *vagueness* in the world, but it seems to me that the world is crystal clear in and of itself. The vagueness comes in, on my view, when we notice that there is a loose degree of fit between our conceptual scheme and the world, and there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for this, although I can only provide a brief sketch of it here. By the very nature of a cognitive apparatus, there must be a trade-off between complexity and practicality, and so the discriminations made on any conceptual scheme are going to be very course-grained with respect to the world. And there is absolutely no reason to think that the course-grained discriminations *must* correspond neatly to the way the world is in itself. A conceptual scheme can be quite practical *without* such a neat correspondence and the immense degree of complexity it would entail. But giving up on a one-to-one correspondence between our concepts and the world in itself means rejecting the sort of naïve realism that Searle ascribes to.

While Searle is right in maintaining that conceptual relativism does not refute realism, it seems to me that he has not fully appreciated the following point: conceptual entities are not things in themselves, because they are not parts of the world in itself; rather, conceptual entities are things *on* a conceptual scheme, because they are parts of the world *on* a conceptual scheme. There is a big issue here in regard to conceptual relativism and meaning and reference, and I can't possibly deal with it here, but it is basically this: If our terms refer to parts of the world as

we carve it up, but not to parts of the world in itself, then to what do our terms refer, exactly? And what could possibly provide meaning on such a view? Such questions are difficult enough for the relativist and the realist, but become quite sublime for the relativist who is *also* a realist. Searle seems to fail to appreciate this point to a degree that is simply inexcusable.

Conclusion

At this point I would like to take a step back from all this and reassess our naïve view of the world. The world cannot be conceived as it is in itself; the only way a being can understand and act in the world is by means of a conceptual scheme. So it's not merely "acceptable" or "permissible" to do this – it's *necessary*. Without a conceptual scheme the world would be an unintelligible mass. And since we can only think in terms of our conceptual scheme, it is acceptable to suppose (in most cases) that the world *really is* just like our conceptual scheme says it is. In fact, that is what conceptual schemes are all about – providing us with a means for assessing how the world is. But there are important circumstances in which we need to recognize the multiplicity and arbitrariness of conceptual schemes. One case would be when we are attempting to understand how we or some other being conceives of the world (e.g. bats or aliens). Another case is when someone attempts to make claims regarding things in themselves independently of a conceptual scheme, since there simply is no fact of the matter in such cases (most varieties of realism fall into this category).

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