Realism, Nominalism, Idealism

Realism: Theory of the reality of abstract or general terms, or universals, which are held to have an equal and sometimes a superior reality to actual physical particulars. Universals exist before things, ante res. Opposed to nominalism (q.v.) according to which universals have a being only after things, post res. Realism means

a) in ontology: that no derogation [detracting; taking away] of the reality of universals is valid, the realm of essences, or possible universals, being as real as, if not more real than, the realm of existence, or actuality;

b) in epistemology: that sense experience reports a true and uninterrupted, if limited, account of objects; that it is possible to have faithful and direct knowledge of the actual world.

While realism was implicit in Egyptian religion, where truth was through deification distinguished from particular truths, and further suggested in certain aspects of Ionian philosophy, it was first explicitly set forth by Plato in his doctrine of the ideas and developed by Aristotle in his doctrine of the forms. According to Plato, the ideas have a status of possibility which makes them independent both of the mind by which they may be known and of the actual world of particulars in which they may take place. Aristotle amended this, so that his forms have a being only in things, in rebus.

Realism in its Platonic version was the leading philosophy of the Christian Middle Ages until Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) officially adopted the Aristotelian version. It has been given a new impetus in recent times by Charles S. Peirce (1839–1914) in America and by G. E. Moore (1873–1958) in England.


REALISM. From the Latin res meaning “thing.” In philosophy the term has had two major references. In the problem of universals (q.v.), Realism is set in contrast to Nominalism. In the problem of the independence of the external world, Realism stands in contrast to Idealism.

A. The first of these two usages has had a long history. The course of the dispute, centered in the Middle Ages, is treated under the topic, Universals. Realism is one of the positions in that dispute. In this connection the doctrine of Realism means that universals have a reality of their own, an extra-mental existence. Positions are often marked out, running from moderate to absolute

Realism. The more definite, fixed, and eternal the status of the universals, the more absolute the Realism.

(1) Plato … is usually thought of as an absolute realist, while Aristotle … is regarded as a moderate realist. Actually, there is a continuum from the view of Nominalism, i.e., that the universal is only a name, through Conceptualism, i.e., that the universal has existence only in the mind, through moderate and absolute Realism….

B. In the more recent controversies over Idealism the term has stood for the view that objects of knowledge exist independently of our awareness. Since objects of knowledge include both things and thoughts, in most modern doctrines of Realism this has often been the case — the second sense of the term is virtually identical with the first.


Nominalism: (Lat. nominalis, belonging to a name) In scholastic philosophy, the theory that abstract or general terms, or universals, represent no objective real existents, but are mere words or names, mere vocal utterances, “flatus vocis”. Reality is admitted only to actual physical particulars. Universals exist only post res [after the thing; the thing exists first, then after it is in the mind].

Opposite of Realism (q.v.) which maintains that universals exist ante res [before the thing; the thing can exist in the mind before it is experienced].

First suggested by Boethius in his 6th century Latin translation of the Introduction to the Categories (of Aristotle) by Porphyry (A.D. 233-304). Porphyry had raised the question of how Aristotle was to be interpreted of this score, and had decided the question in favor of what was later called nominalism. The doctrine did not receive any prominence until applied to the Sacrament of the Eucharist by Berengar in the 11th century. Berengar was the first scholastic to insist upon the evidence of his senses when examining the nature of the Eucharist. Shortly after, Roscellinus, who had broadened the doctrine to the denial of the reality of all universals and the assertion of the sole reality of physical particulars, was forced by the Council of Soissons to recant.

Thereafter, despite Abelard’s unsuccessful attempt to reconcile the doctrine with realism by finding a half-way position between the two, nominalism was not again explicitly held until William of Occam (1280–1349) revived it and attempted to defend it within the limits.
allowed by Church dogma. In the first frankly nominalistic system, Occam distinguished between the real and the grammatical meanings of terms or universals. He assigned a real status to universals in the mind, and thus was the first to see that nominalism can have a subjective as well as an objective aspect. He maintained that to our intellects, however, everything real must be some particular individual thing. After Occam, nominalism as an explicitly held doctrine disappeared until recently, when it has been restated in certain branches of Logical Positivism.—J.K.F.


NOMINALISM. From the Latin term nomen meaning “name.” Nominalism represents the minimal position with respect to the problem of Universals (q.v.). The position is that universals are not real entities either in the world or in the mind, but names which refer to groups or classes of individual things. The position of Nominalism is difficult to distinguish from some forms of Conceptualism (q.v.) and in what follows, although we shall list those philosophers most often regarded as Nominalists, it should be borne in mind that most of those on the list have been regarded by some as belonging to the group of Conceptualists….


Idealism: Any system or doctrine whose fundamental interpretative principle is ideal. Broadly, any theoretical or practical view emphasizing mind (soul, spirit, life) or what is characteristically of pre-eminent value or significance to it. Negatively, the alternative to Materialism. (Popular confusion arises from the fact that Idealism is related to either or both uses of adjective “ideal,” i.e., (a) pertaining to ideas, and (b) pertaining to ideals. While a certain inner bond of sympathy can be established between these two standpoints, for theoretical purposes they must be clearly distinguished.) Materialism emphasizes the spatial, pictorial, corporeal, sensuous, non-valuational, factual, and mechanistic. Idealism stresses the supra- or non-spatial, non-pictorial, incorporeal, suprasensuous, normative, or valuational, and teleological [purposeful]. The term Idealism shares the unavoidable expansion of such words as Idea, Mind, Spirit, and even Person; and in consequence it now possesses usefulness only in pointing out a general direction of thought, unless qualified, e.g., Platonic Idealism, Personal Idealism, Objective Idealism, Moral Idealism, etc.

The term appeared in the later 17th century to name (a) the theory of archetypal Ideas, whether in the original Platonic teaching or as incorporated into Christian Platonic and Scholastic theism; (b) the epistemological doctrine of Descartes and Locke, according to which “ideas,” i.e., direct objects of human apprehension, are subjective and privately possessed. Since this latter view put in doubt the very existence of a material world, the term began to be used in the early 18th century for acosmism (according to which the external world is only the projection of our minds), and immaterialism (doctrine of the non-existence of material being). Its use was popularized by Kant, who named his theory of knowledge Critical or Transcendental Idealism, and by his metaphysical followers, the Post-Kantian Idealists.

Metaphysics. Pure Idealism or Immaterialism identifies ontological [nature of being] reality (substance, substantives, concrete individuality) exclusively with the ideal, i.e., Mind, Spirit, Soul, Person, Archetypal Ideas, Thought…. With respect to the metaphysical status of self-consciousness and purposeful activity, Idealism is either impersonalistic or personalistic….

Impersonalistic Idealism identifies ontological reality essentially with non-conscious spiritual principle, unconscious psychic agency, pure thought, impersonal or “pure” consciousness, pure Ego, subconscious Will, impersonal logical Mind, etc. Personalistic Idealism characterizes concrete reality as personal selfhood, i.e., as possessing self-consciousness. With respect to the relation of the Absolute or World-Ground … to finite selves or centers of consciousness, varying degrees of unity or separateness are posited. The extreme doctrines are radical monism and radical pluralism. Monistic Idealism (Pantheistic Idealism) teaches that the finite self is a part, mode, aspect, moment, appearance or projection of the One. Pluralistic Idealism defends both the inner privacy of the finite self and its relative freedom from direct or causal dependency upon the One. With respect to Cosmology, pure idealism is either subjective or objective. Subjective Idealism (acosmism) holds that Nature is merely external, real existence. (The term “Subjective Idealism” is also used for the view that the ontologically real consists of subjects, i.e., possessors of experience.) Objective Idealism identifies an externally natural Nature with the thought or activity of the World Mind. (In Germany the term “Objective Idealism” is commonly identified with the view that finite minds are parts — modes, moments, projections, appearances, members — of the Absolute Mind.) Epistemological Idealism derives metaphysical idealism from the identification of objects with ideas. In its nominalistic form the claim is made that “T0 be is to be perceived.” From the standpoint of rationalism it is argued that there can be no Object without a Subject. Subjects, relations, sensations, and feelings are mental; and since no other type of analogy remains by which to
characterize a non-mental thing-in-itself, pure idealism follows as the only possible view of Being.

Realistic Idealism recognizes the reality of non-ideal types of being, but relegates them to a subordinate status with respect either to quantity of being or power. This view is either atheistic or theistic. Realistic theism admits the existence of one or more kinds of non-mental being considered as independently co-eternal with God, eternally dependent upon Deity, or as a divine creation. Platonic Idealism, as traditionally interpreted, identifies absolute being with timeless Ideas or disembodied essences. These, organically united in the Good, are the archetypes and the dynamic causes of existent, material things. The Ideas are also archetypes of rational thought, and the goal of fine art and morality. Axiological Idealism, a modern development of Platonism and Kantianism, maintains that the category of Value is logically and metaphysically prior to that of Being.

The idealistic doctrine known as Conceptual Realism identifies the logical (and at times the perceptual) content of experience with universals (essences, objectives, subsistents, etc.) considered as non-mental, i.e., as essentially independent of cognitive subjects.

Epistemology. Theistic Platonism maintains that the archetypes of existent things are eternal ideas in the mind of God. Epistemological Idealism teaches that all entities other than egos or subjects of experience are exclusively noetic objects, i.e., have no existence or reality apart from the relation of being perceived or thought. Transcendental Idealism (Critical Idealism) is Kant’s name for his doctrine that knowledge is a synthetic, relational product of the logical self (transcendental unity of apperception [1. Conscious perception with full awareness. 2. The process of understanding by which newly observed qualities of an object are related to past experience]). Phenomenology is Husserl’s name for the science that investigates the essences or natures of objects considered apart from their existential or metaphysical status.…


IDEALISM. A term first used philosophically by Leibniz at the start of the 18th century. He applied the term to Plato’s thought, contrasting it with the materialism of Epicurus. The term thus designates philosophies which regard the mental or ideational as the key to the nature of reality. From the 17th to the beginning of the 20th century, the term has been much used in the classification of philosophies.