

What is "critical idealism"?

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People will tell you that idealism of the political kind has nothing to do with idealism of the philosophical kind. I do not agree. The political kind is described (by those sympathetic to it) as a pursuit of ambitious aims, and an optimistic estimation of our ability to achieve them. Those less sympathetic dismiss it as mere naiveté and romanticism. The philosophical kind is the doctrine that mind, whatever that may be (and the arguments rage) is more *really* real than matter, which is actually our name for a kind of experience which the mind has. Idealists maintain that as mind has evolved in the universe, the universe has in a way gotten more real, and that what we call ideas are the clearest and most explicit expression of that reality, not something other than it. They are the heirs of a realization made by Parmenides in 500 BC that "all" and "whole" are two different concepts.

Think of a shot of the Earth from a satellite far enough away to get the whole planet in the frame. We know that we don't see *all* of the planet in the picture. For a start, one side faces away from us, so of course we don't see that. But even more so, we know that any point on that globe can be zoomed-in on, and an endless well of detail contained in reality at every point. A telescopic zoom-in on any square kilometer yields a wealth of detail down to the square meter, itself divisible into the square millimeter, which is in turn only the beginning of the microscopic zoom-in, down through the molecular to the atomic level, which itself is only the beginning of the particle-accelerator zoom-in down to quarks and super-strings, itself a quantum threshold upon who-as-yet knows what. Doubly infinite, no traveler could ever be seasoned enough to be able to claim to have seen ALL the Earth, just as no physicist will nowadays claim we have reached an absolute bottom line of indivisible simplicity.

But nevertheless, there it is, the whole Earth, right there, right now. Now apply this thought to reality in general. Parmenides' claim to have seen the whole is not, as some uncomprehending commentators have supposed, an assertion that the universe is spherical with a physical limit, or a denial that physical changes and movements are real. It is simply the observation that despite its obvious infinity, we can also "see the whole" - we see the physical world as one, and understand it as a whole. This is not a claim to understand it *all* or to have seen it *all* or even that it makes sense to speak of such a possibility. It is just the claim that despite our massive ignorance concerning what's in the "all", what we do know in advance is that everything is part of the whole. No matter what bizarre scientific anomalies are discovered with telescopes and microscopes and particle-accelerators, they will

all be part of the whole, and will need to be incorporated into our conception of that whole, perhaps even bringing about a revision in that very conception. The history of science can be described as the history of just these sorts of revisions.

Now there have been a long line of idealists since Parmenides, including Cusanus, Leibniz, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Bradley and the Scottish idealists, and A.N.Whitehead, and Martin Heidegger, just to name some of the major figures. There are more differences between them than similarities, but one thing they all share is a grasp of Parmenides' realization. The whole is not any more in one place than any other place: wherever you are, there you are, fully in it, exactly as much as anyone anywhere else is. Nothing is more a part of the whole or less a part of the whole than anything else. There is no hierarchy, with some people or places more a part of the whole than others who are less so. It is entirely, or not at all; you are entirely, or not at all. Much like the atmosphere, we all share it, but no one owns it. We all participate in it whether we like it or not.

This might seem a long way from politics and even further from culture in general, but the point is that ways of looking at the world color our whole lives. The money-minded business person for example tends to think of other aspects of their life in the same way, even importing business-jargon into, say, the home and family life. All values are quantified, all exchanges commodified, all activity thought of in terms of production and consumption. Given this psychological fact, we can see that thinking in terms of "seeing the whole" will likewise pervade the idealist's life, but with contrasting results. No longer is considering the national interest enough, as it was a century ago. We must see the whole of the global context, and act accordingly. No longer is considering the viewpoint of one's particular ethnic or cultural perspective sufficient: we must see the whole of this multicultural country and tolerate accordingly. No longer is knowing about one's own moment in time enough: we must understand our whole history to understand where we have come from and see why we are the way we are, and we must to the best of our abilities try to see the whole of our impact upon the future, and not just those aspects of that impact that we want to see.

Two consequences flow from these basic considerations. On the one hand, we need to build a healthy modesty into our estimation of our own comprehension. Once good people thought that the world was a vast rock resting on the back of a huge tortoise perched atop three massive elephants. Don't laugh: it was the best they could do with what they understood concerning the whole, and was a great advance upon the previous utter incomprehension concerning the very question: "What is the

whole?" Which brings us to the realization on the other hand that although our concept of the whole is inevitably flawed in some way, and so must always be open to revision, having *some* concept of the whole is inescapable. Each and every mind in our infinite diversity must in some way contextualize itself, place itself in a world. For the infant the whole is nothing but the crib and the breast; for the child it is the school, the playground, and the home. For the adult, it becomes the city, the country, the planet, the solar system, the galaxy, the whole universe.

This is why I recommended against laughing above, for at this point the laugh would rebound upon us. For what is "at the edge" of the clusters of clusters of galaxies that we call the universe, and what is on the other side of that edge? Those into at least popular science, if not actually astrophysicists and cosmologists, have a kind of idea that there's this thing called the curvature of space, and that our current understanding of the whole is that 3D space is curved in a fourth dimension, analogous to the way in which a 2D surface can be curved in a third dimension. To a tiny insect, the surface of a large ball is effectively flat. This might lead it to think that it is either infinite or it has an edge. But actually neither is quite right. Obviously it has no edge, but it's not infinite in the sense in which the insect might think. It can always keep going on the apparently flat surface, but if it starts leaving marks, it will eventually find ones long since left behind suddenly popping up from out of the forward direction. The sense in which a 3D universe can also be a whole is the same sense in which the ball can be an infinite whole for the insect. No point on the ball's surface is its center, and nowhere is the edge or periphery to be found. If you traveled to the "edge" of the universe, it would still seem to be the center, and where you had come from would seem to be the edge. There is a general relativity of perspectives. No one in their right mind would ever dream of claiming to have had experience from anything but a tiny fraction of "all perspectives". But all are perspectives of the whole on the whole and in the whole.

So here's the story: critical idealists are big-picture specialists. The whole is their sole concern, whether it be cosmology, sociology, biology or politics, it is how the whole is thought which is their main question. That's the idealist part. The critical part is the right relationship to the intellectual modesty principle above. A healthy intellectual modesty is maintained through the incisive use of the scalpel of criticism, wielding very carefully the tools of skepticism, logic, rhetoric and debate, especially and above all with respect to one's self, but next and no less importantly with respect to the cultural and institutional context in which we find ourselves situated.

Thus critical idealists do not aim to rule, for they know they would fail. Understanding and accepting failure is in fact a crucial aspect of the experience of any idealist, and maintaining a critical relationship to the concept and the reality of failure is a defining trait of a critical idealist. The critical idealist knows that the pragmatist can and must rule. The critical idealist is however valuable to the pragmatist in just the way that the compass is valuable to the sailor. This sensitive, edgy, highly critical piece of metal if balanced carefully and maintained properly is in touch with the whole in a way which works just as well for those who don't understand how as it does for those who do. A theoretical understanding of the Earth's magnetic field and the properties of certain metals is not necessary to learn how to use it to find north, with the proviso that the boat stays between the Arctic Circle and the Antarctic Circle. However, if it strays beyond these limits, its crazy behavior might seem to the uncomprehending sailor to be possessed by demons or some such superstitious nonsense. The one who understands magnetism's role in the whole knows that the problem is that at the poles, the magnetic field lines are perpendicular to the Earth's surface, and so are useless for surface orientation, which must then be done in the old way, by the stars.

At best, the critical idealist can be employed by a non-superstitious seafarer, and the expedition's chance of success increases. Not so good is the superstitious captain, liable to smash a valuable instrument because it confuses him when taken beyond its limits. At worst, idealists remain uncritical, and are merely used by the pragmatists as the canary in the coal-mine: when the idealists start dropping, time to evacuate to another theater of exploitation. Idealism remains critical only when it understands that the role which it has to play in a healthy intellectual culture is neither a dominant nor a dispensable one. Unlike uncritical idealists, critical idealists do not want to take charge. The compass should not want to be the captain: this is critical. This is because critical idealists are not uncritically beholden to a utopian interpretation of their dreams of a better world. Critical idealists can both admit that neither they themselves nor the world in which they find themselves will ever be perfect, while also being able unambiguously to define a direction *away from* imperfection and towards a relatively less imperfect state by means of a critical understanding of their own inevitable failures.