

Exploring Idealism and Realism

Most of us were brought up to believe that what we essentially are is a body-mind existing within a universe made of solid stuff called matter. When we encounter the Direct Path teaching, we are shown, through a process of higher reasoning, that we cannot be the body or the mind: we are that which is aware of body, mind and world. We cannot be what we are aware of. Going on from there we come to recognise that all we know of our body and the world is bodily sensations and external sense perceptions, both of which arise in mind. All we know of a tree is the sight of the tree, or if we go close, the sensation of touch as we stroke the bark. That seeing and sensation of touch arises in mind and is conditioned by mind. We can't find any direct experiential evidence of anything existing outside mind. So at this point, following the principle of Occam's razor¹, we might reasonably conclude that actually there is nothing outside mind. That is an idealist position, and it is the model that the majority of non-dual teachers put forward.

So the question arises: what about minds other than my own? How is it that some experiences are shared, and some are not? Does a tree in the forest exist if no-one is seeing it, and does it make a sound when it falls if there's no-one around to hear it? This was the problem faced by the 18th century idealist Bishop Berkeley. He solved it through the concept of God's infinite mind. God perceives everything that is perceived, and therefore the source of everything that is perceived is God's mind. Of course, for those of an atheistic persuasion, the concept of God's mind could equally well be replaced by 'universal mind'. But in fact, non-dual idealism doesn't require the existence of either 'God's mind' or 'universal mind'. We could just as well say that consciousness is the reality of all minds, and that what we call 'the world' is the sum total of all the perceptions arising in all of the minds. In other words, the world is made out of mind, which is made out of consciousness.

Having been given an idealist model when I came to study the Direct Path, I assumed that non-duality implies idealism. It came as a huge shock when I listened to a YouTube clip in which Francis Lucille explained that realism can also be consistent with non-duality. So I asked him for more explanation of what a realist non-dual model might look like. Here is part of that dialogue:

FL: Realism means simply that there are other forms of existence than minds. The openness to the possibility that there are other forms of existence than minds. So reality in that sense, is bigger than minds. Or there is this statement that the Universe exists independently from minds. So that would be the realism position.

Now, a distinction has to be made between realism and materialism. Materialism is a branch of realism, according to which reality is made of matter. It is kind of an antiquated version of philosophy based on 19th century physics in which matter was seen as an aggregate of small particles, like little balls of granite or metal, in orbit around each other, in the same way as planets are in orbit around stars. This view of matter has been completely debunked by 20th century physics. So this form of materialism is out-dated. ...

But realism is something else than materialism; it is a more general view of reality. So going back to the duality between idealism and realism, we face *apparently* two possibilities. Idealism – there is only mind. The thesis is, idealists say: we don't have to posit the existence of a universe independently from minds, *because* we don't have the experience of it, because we only have the experience of our mind. Therefore, to posit the existence of a universe existing

¹ Occam's razor, also known as the principle of parsimony, is the principle that in constructing a theoretical model, we should introduce as few entities as possible

independently from mind is unnecessary and according to Occam's razor rule, which we should apply in this case, we should let go of this unnecessary, complicated, convoluted theory of a Universe existing out there, and stick to the fact of our experience: there are only minds. So that is the case in favour of idealism.

However, there is a flaw in this logic which is the following. It is true we have no evidence that the universe exists independently from our minds, but if we apply this logic, we don't have any evidence either that other minds exist, that minds other than our own mind exist. So if we are consistent with the application of this logic, if we apply Occam's rule to deny the existence of an external world, we have to apply the very same Occam's razor to deny the existence of other minds, and we are reduced to the position of solipsism which is not very satisfactory. That which is good for the goose is also good for the gander. That which is good for the external world is also good for other minds. It turns out because of this reason, that this idealist view which seemed to be very beautiful and very economical as a theory, requires us ultimately to be perfect solipsists. And then of course, with terrible consequences – it denies love, it denies the fact that we are talking with each other in this moment – there is no point, if only my mind exists, in having this conversation with you.

So then the discovery of this flaw in the idealist view, now opens up the possibility of the realist view, it makes it much more palatable, much more possible, much more valid, at least as valid as the idealist view from the standpoint of logic and reason.

Now the next question is: can we and should we try to find out between these two views of reality which one is true? If we investigate this question, we can see that obviously there is no phenomenal evidence that could help us make this choice. Therefore, it flies in the face of reason to make this choice. Therefore, to claim that the idealist position is the only one that is valid, is not rational, is not logical. So if you use reason in your quest for truth, you have to be reasonable all the way. Therefore, any teacher, truth seeker who makes the claim that the idealist position is the only one which is true, is not reasonable.

Now it is true that the idealist position is consistent with non-duality. But just as the idealist position is consistent with non-duality, so is the realist position. There is only one reality. This one reality creates the human minds, as a result of the human brain, the human brain is part of the human body, which is part of the planet earth which is part of the Universe which is the creation of the manifestation of this one reality.

If you ask me which one of these two possibilities do you prefer, well I want to have the best of both worlds. I like them both but I am not infatuated by any of those. It's a little bit like in quantum mechanics the duality between waves and particles. Depending on the circumstances, you can choose to consider a wave or choose to consider a particle.

We went on to discuss whether or not the idea of universal mind overcomes the problem of solipsism. Here is Francis's response:

FL: Rationally your universal mind is as crazy as solipsism from a purely rational view. By 'crazy' I mean, unverifiable through phenomenal experience. That is what I mean by crazy. Irrational. You can attach yourself to all the irrational, unverified theories that you want, then you might as well be a religious person and believe that Jesus walked on water or whatever.

That's the bad news; you don't have the experience of the universal mind. But the good news is that you have the experience of universal awareness. So what is the problem? It may be that

your intuition of the universality of awareness translates into attributing universal awareness, human-mind-like qualities and solely human mind like qualities, in a sense restricting reality to be human-like, to be anthropomorphic, somehow. So, I am not denying this possibility, but why would we restrict reality to be mind-like? It would be like putting man at the centre of creation, or putting planet Earth at the centre of the universe. It is this type of anthropocentrism that resurfaces here in a more subtle form. And we go back to Voltaire's words when someone in his presence was saying 'God created man in his image', to which Voltaire quipped, 'and conversely'.

The idealist position becomes a fallacy the moment it negates that which is not perceived. We cannot negate the existence of something we don't perceive. In this moment I am not perceiving Manhattan. It doesn't mean that New York doesn't exist in this moment. But it is true that New York isn't present in my perception in this moment.

JB: And it wouldn't matter if New York wasn't present in any human mind, at the moment.

FL: Yes. The question is: If New York isn't present in any human mind, or any mouse mind, or any spider mind, any virus mind or whatever, could New York still have some form of existence? And that takes us back to the beginning of the question between idealism and realism.

And the truth is there are advantages and disadvantages to each of these positions. If we say it doesn't exist, then we have to be solipsist. If we say New York doesn't exist when it doesn't appear to minds, either we say it appears in God's mind – but then we are not rational, if we are rational, we have to be solipsist – or we have to be open to the possibility that it exists in a different form than mind, which is the realist position.

Now something important. There are two forms of realism:

1. One form of realism states that mind doesn't have an existence independently from the reality of the universe, from the universe. So one form of realism states that the human mind is dependent on the human body.
2. Another form of realism, more general, makes the statement: we don't know about that.

That is really important this distinction. So of course, the form of realism that negates the existence of mind in the absence of the supporting physical body, this form of realism is also irrational. Just as irrational as the idealist position that negates the existence of the world, in the absence of mind. To negate the existence of mind, in the absence of the world, is as irrational as to negate the absence of the world in the absence of mind. So you see the only logical position is not to make this determination between these two possibilities. And it doesn't matter, because we are aware we are the reality and who cares about the rest. And perhaps these two theories, these two representations, these two models – the idealist model and the realist model – they are just subjected to the limitations of human minds. I mean with human minds, we are looking at reality through a very narrow window. You know this awesome reality requires humility on our behalf and to accept not to know.

So this I want to do. I want to liberate you from the limitations and from the belief, which is subtle, but nevertheless inherent in the idealist position. In the very same way as I would try liberate someone who has adopted the realist position from the subtle belief that is inherent in her position. To reach this beautiful state of not knowing. Total not-knowing. Total freedom.

[Francis Lucille, 8th August 2020: *Experience Is The True Substance Of Perception*]

A realist position can also accommodate the neuroscience model of thoughts being created by a human brain – the model of mind as biocomputer that we discussed in the previous paper. But ultimately, we need to go beyond all models to the reality of our experience:

FL: You can take two possibilities. The realist non-dualist version would be: 'The world exists. The reality of the world is the reality of everything else.' That is consistent with thoughts being created by the human brain, or whatever. But nevertheless, the real perceiver of that is the reality of the universe. And the alternative possibility is the idealist version according to which the world doesn't exist independently from mind. Consciousness projects all those minds in a way which is consistent with the existence of an external world, but which doesn't really exist.

The question arises: from these two hypotheses, can we verify or falsify one of those? And the answer from our human vantage point is 'no we can't'. And if we take into account the fact that the human mind has just access to external reality through a very narrow window, and that these two possible conjectures are creations of the human mind, a third answer emerges; that is that neither of those versions is good – they are just explanations for the human mind, but in fact reality is beyond that.

It's a bit like 'is a particle a particle, or is it a wave?'. Well neither and both. It's the same. So is the world made of matter? Is the world made of mind? Well, both and neither is another option. But no matter what, there is only one reality. That's the good news. And that's the hypothesis that can be tested.

[Francis Lucille, 29/07/2020: [Where Do Matter And Mind Meet](#)]

More recently, I asked Francis for clarification of an explanation he gave on pages 17 and 18 of *The Perfume of Silence*, which seemed to hint at idealism. Part of his answer gives a beautiful insight into the expansiveness, freedom and beauty that arises from allowing the possibility of a realist model:

FL: Everything we know, is either through the mind, or consciousness itself, from our human observation position. So we don't know whether there are other forms of existence than mind-stuff. But we cannot exclude this possibility. ...

One example I often use is the realm of mathematical ideas – it's connected to Platonic forms, Plato's 'intellect'. Mathematical ideas such as the number π , they have a fixed value, they don't evolve in time, and they are independent of whoever conceives them. So they have a form of existence that is independent from any specific human mind, in the same way that a tree or a mountain out there in the world has some form of existence that is independent from each human mind through which awareness perceives it. And, in this world of mathematical ideas, there are distinctions. The number π and the number 1 are not the same number. So there are differences. However, what is interesting is that there is no 'time' dimension in it, so there is no evolution. So it's a kind of 'space' which is very different from our usual space-time of the physical world. So we have to be open to the possibility of other realms to which the human mind has no access, that's all. We cannot 'limit God', if you will. We have to allow God to be infinite in all possible meanings of the word. ...

[Francis Lucille, 23/1/2021: *Now Is The Gateway To Reality*]

Contemplation

When the mind abides in not-knowing, when it is, at every moment, open to the unknown, it is a tool of higher reasoning. Any other use of the mind is a nuisance.

[Jean Klein: Open to the Unknown]