

WHAT IS REALISM?*

by Michael Ayers and Paul Snowdon

II—Paul Snowdon

In the paper to which I am responding, Professor Ayers has set himself the task of formulating a tenable version of realism.¹ Professor Ayers does a number of things: he provides his reading of the origins and developments of the debate about realism and its alternatives in modern philosophy; he criticises some recent prominent ideas, as either inconsistent with realism, and hence as being, as he sees it, idealist, or as being in other ways inadequate; and, he spells out, sometimes without fully developing them, different aspects of the views he favours. Ayers's discussion is both interesting and rich, and my response cannot engage with much of it.² I shall certainly not attempt to give an answer to the question in Ayers's title.

What, though, is Ayers's own answer to the question? It is not easy to summarise but amongst the main points are the following. (A) There is a scholastic-Cartesian framework concerning the relation of thought and experience to their objects, in terms of which two philosophical approaches can be defined, namely the Cartesian stance and direct realism, both of which should be

1. The reply that I produced for the actual Aristotelian Society Conference acquired existence so absurdly late that it could not go into the Supplementary Volume. For that inefficiency I must apologise, especially to Professor Ayers, Dr William Child and Anthony Price. This is a considerably expanded version that, I hope, both engages in a much fuller way with Professor Ayers's views and achieves a better understanding of them. In attaining this better understanding I wish to thank Professor Ayers for his remarks about my initial comments, but especially Dr Child for both spoken responses and two written responses to different earlier versions of this paper. I have also tried to attend to some issues that arose in the discussion at the conference, stimulated by the astute questions of Tom Baldwin, John Dupre, Jane Heal, Bob Kirk, Penelope Mackie, Michael Martin, Michael Morris, and Howard Robinson (and others). Finally, some responses by Dr Avramides and by Oliver Pooley have been helpful.

2. Other aspects of Ayers's more general ontological views are critically discussed in Mehmet (2002, forthcoming).

*Reply to Michael Styers's paper at the Joint Session, 2001.

rejected by a plausible realism.³ (B) Realism should countenance the existence of what might be called ordinary common-sense physical objects and not restrict itself to the objects postulated by physics.⁴ (C) The currently popular direct realist approach to perception, namely disjunctivism, should be rejected.⁵ (D) There is non-conceptual perceptual content.⁶ (E) ‘Reality structures experience and so thought. We are that closely in touch with it. The supposed problem of comparing ‘conceptual scheme’ with reality does not arise.’⁷

I shall, for reasons of space, not comment on (B) or (D). Rather, I shall try to make a case for three general propositions, which engage with the other three claims (plus some other aspects of his paper). (1) In part I, I shall argue, commenting on (A), that the elucidation by Professor Ayers of the issues he is considering, in terms of idealism, but, more importantly, in terms of the scholastic-Cartesian framework he sets up, is not helpful. (2) I shall, in part II, pay particular attention to Ayers’s arguments for (C), and the question I wish to pursue in that discussion is whether he has accumulated enough evidence to persuade those of us who have been attracted to the views about perception which he is criticising (roughly, the approach called ‘disjunctivism’) that we have been pursuing a mistaken research programme. I shall, unsurprisingly, argue that he has not. (3) I shall finally and briefly argue that two of the claims in (E) are hard to reconcile with the general approach to thought and experience that Ayers seems to adopt.

I

Ayers’s Task and the Framework. Professor Ayers’s philosophical goal in his paper is to determine, or suggest, what views about a variety of topics, including, perception, thought, classification, the structure of reality, and our relation to the real physical

3. See, for example, Ayers’s Abstract, and p. 105.

4. See pp. 99–102.

5. See pp. 102–107.

6. See pp. 107–110.

7. Quoted in an abbreviated form from page 110. I quote these words, which might be regarded as containing Ayers’s main conclusion, because I am not sure that I understand the claim.

world, are the correct ones for a realist to adopt. By a realist Ayers means, roughly, and at least, someone who thinks that there is a spatial world, with the objects in it existing independently of our or any experience and thought. He does not, it seems to me, pay much attention to defining, in any more precise way, realism as a general philosophical position, nor does he argue that realism is true. Rather, taking for granted, completely reasonably, that it is true, his important question is what views on these other matters should a realist adopt—or, as one might perhaps put it, what views on these other matters are actually true. Ayers is particularly concerned to show that some popular views about these matters are *not* the correct ones.

Ayers, however, introduces at the start of his account two ideas which he clearly thinks are essential ingredients in his discussion of the questions I have just outlined: they are (i) idealism, and (ii) the framework of concepts and propositions which derive from Descartes and which are represented in his diagram on page 92. Is Ayers is right to give these the central role that he does in his discussion?

(i) Idealism

The notion of idealism has, it seems to me, a twofold role in Ayers's argument. First, he brings it in when he is characterising his question or task. Second, he repeatedly criticises views, about, for example, concepts or perception or language or justification, as idealist, which, given their incompatibility, amounts to saying that these views cannot form part of an acceptable realism. I want to begin by considering how idealism first enters.

In introducing idealism Ayers says, 'It is a necessary and sufficient condition for a position to be, in the chief traditional sense, 'idealist' that it denies the independent and absolute reality specifically of sensible or material things. ... A realist *tout court*, we may therefore say, is a philosopher who adopts an argued, rationally tenable position incompatible with idealism in this traditional sense. My title accordingly asks what form a tenable, unambiguously anti-idealist position might take' (pp. 91–2). So he glosses the title question as about the rejection of idealism. Naturally, given this, he starts the first section of his paper with a question about *idealism*: 'What, then, is idealism, if it is not *merely* anti-realism with respect to one particular class of statements, about material things?' (p. 92).

What looks to be going on here is that Ayers, in the first sentence quoted above, is defining idealism as the denial of realism, and then asking what the denial of idealism (= realism) requires. If so, the route via idealism is quite unnecessary, for he could have said directly that realism *is* the affirmation of the independent and absolute reality of material things, and that his question is what form a tenable *realism* might take. Another reason for saying the involvement of idealism is unnecessary is that when one is trying to determine what the most plausible version of realism is, one is comparing alternative versions of realism. There is no need to look at views that are not even realist.

A little more needs to be said, though, both because Ayers's characterisation of idealism (and realism) is hardly satisfactory, and because there are interesting questions which arise. First, Ayers talks of idealism as the denial of the 'independent or absolute' reality of material things, but this merely elicits the question: independent of what, and what does 'absolute' mean? Second, Ayers characterises idealism as simply the denial that material things have this 'independent or absolute reality'. However, idealism is, surely, not simply a negative claim, but is, rather, at least often, a positive characterisation of what the existence of material things actually consists in, namely, in the fulfilment of some condition to do with experience or thought, or subjects of experience and thought, that is to say, with something 'ideal'.⁸ It might be objected that idealism cannot be an account of the existence conditions or nature of *material objects* since idealism denies there are such things. There are, no doubt, ways of taking 'material thing' according to which idealists would be committed to denying the reality of such things, but to state idealism of a quite standard sort we need some general category which applies to such spatial objects as tables and chairs and which picks out the objects that an idealist is aiming to give an account of. We can use 'material object' for that, and can then say that idealism *is* a positive account of the existence of such things. So if 'idealism' stands for a positive account of the existence of material things and 'realism' is another positive thesis, Ayers should not *equate* realism with anti-idealism.

8. The view that nothing at all exists (which might be called absolute nihilism) denies the independent and absolute existence of material objects, but it is *not* idealism.

Further, in giving his potted history, after he has described the attempts of Descartes and Locke to 'bridge the Cartesian gap', Ayers brings forward idealism. In his general description he says, 'The ideal, in so far as it is amenable to systematic validation, is the real. Superficially, this is responding to the Cartesian gap by denying that it exists; yet at a deeper, often unacknowledged level, it is simply deciding to live with it. Understandably, but misleadingly, idealists often claim to be realists' (p. 96). Ayers has here picked out something that idealists, at least of the sort he is concerned with, do claim, but if idealism and realism are simply contraries what sense can we attach to the understandable, if misleading, claim that idealists often make? To make sense of it we need an understanding of 'real' that does not explicitly define it in terms inconsistent with idealism. So we might say that realism claims that spatial objects are real, that is they do possess a range of fundamental properties, such as occupying space, being perceivable by different senses and different people, remaining in existence over time, having causal powers, and so on. This is vague but let us call such a thesis realism-1. Now, we can say that idealists can claim that realism-1 is consistent with idealism, and that becomes a general claim that is not immediately absurd. We can then have realism-2, which is the conjunction of realism-1 and the denial of idealism. It cannot be right to interpret any idealist as espousing realism-2, but they can intelligibly claim to be realists-1. I think that Ayers is treating his own question as asking what supplementary theses we should add to realism-2. Certainly, most of us are realists-2, but that involves more than merely denying idealism.

The prominence that Ayers accords to idealism runs two further risks of which we should be aware. First, when we are considering how to develop a tenable realism there will frequently be two inconsistent theories between which we have to choose, neither of which is in any sense idealist. Faced by such choices, the emphasis on developing a tenable anti-idealism offers no particular guidance which to choose, and, indeed, invites us to remain happy merely to assert the disjunction of the two inconsistent views. Ayers's aim is better stated as that of constructing a realist viewpoint that gives true and specific accounts of these other (epistemological and ontological) aspects. Second, by describing the task as avoiding idealism, there might be a

temptation to detect idealist elements in all the views that one wishes to reject. Quite clearly though, there may be no idealist elements in lots of wrong views about knowledge, justification, thought and classification.

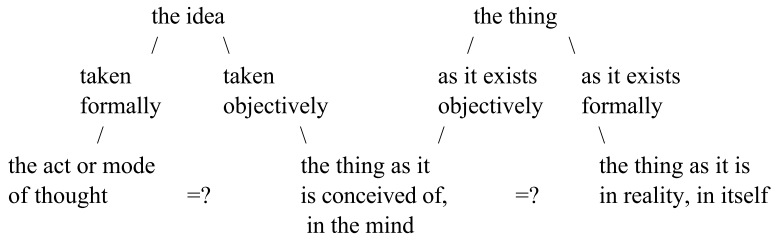
(ii) The Scholastic-Cartesian Framework

Ayers talks of the framework, but also of what he calls the 'Cartesian stance'. I take it that there are two elements here. The framework is the set of categories defined in the diagram (on page 92) which is Ayers's construction from some remarks of Descartes about ideas. This framework provides us with the categories to formulate certain identity propositions (as well as other categories), and what he calls the Cartesian stance is the assertion of one these identities, so called because it is the identity that, according to Ayers, Descartes endorsed. The other identity judgement Ayers tends to call direct realism.

I wish, initially, to raise two doubts. First, why do we really need the scholastic-Cartesian framework? Ayers's central question is 'What is realism?', and by this I assume that he is asking the following question: granting that realism is true, what general accounts of perception, thought and (perhaps) knowledge (etc.) are the correct ones to add to realism? If that is so, the categories that it is necessary to employ are whatever we need to express the interesting alternative accounts of perception, thought and knowledge (etc.) that we are considering. I cannot see why it is necessary to return to Descartes for those categories. There is no overriding requirement to express the philosophy of perception and thought (etc.) in Cartesian categories.

More important, is the framework of categories a coherent and intelligible framework? Ayers's presentation has three stages. First, he gives, with a short introduction, his diagram of the categories and resulting propositions. Second, he relates it to what he thinks of as certain uncontentious ambiguities in our ordinary way of talking about intentionality. Third, he describes what he calls the 'philosophical music', that is the philosophical options and some arguments that arise within the relatively uncontroversial framework. What Ayers is developing, of course, is the terminology that Descartes employs in his argument, in the Third Meditation, for the existence of God. I shall assume that the Cartesian terminology and its role in Descartes' argument are familiar.

Ayers sets out the framework in the diagram that I reproduce (from page 92):



Ayers's assumption is that the various categories are well defined, and that crucially they enable us to define the two identity propositions at the base, leaving us with the central issue of which of the two, if either, to endorse (or so it seems initially). I shall often refer to the two propositions as, respectively, the left hand (or left) and the right hand (or right) proposition. I have tried very hard to understand the framework, but have ended up with the conviction that it is too obscure to be helpful. I shall try to support that conviction.

(1) The first point is that most of the categories defined in the structure are not ones to which we can assign a reference, and in particular that the pivotal category expressed in the words 'the thing as it is conceived of, in the mind' has no reference, and hence, is not an appropriate expression to figure in the identity propositions. I am suggesting that in consequence we do not really know what the propositions are. Let us begin with the four middle categories, starting with the two under 'the idea'. If I speak the scholastic-Cartesian language and say 'The idea is formally F', or 'The idea formally contains F-ness', then what I say just is equivalent to 'The idea is (actually, really) F.' If I speak the language and say 'The idea is objectively F' or 'The idea objectively contains F-ness', I am simply saying 'The idea is of F.' So, if someone says that he is considering the idea taken objectively, I understand him to be saying something about what the idea is of. If he says that he is considering the idea taken formally he can be understood as considering how the idea really, actually is. So we can understand talk of ideas taken formally or objectively. There is a minor difficulty. On the present reading, since an idea is *really* an idea of X, when we are considering it

formally it is not excluded that we are considering it objectively. Perhaps then ‘taking an idea formally’ should be read as considering it *except* in respect of what it is of. We do understand this talk, but I take it as obvious that our understanding does not involve assigning anything as the references of the phrases ‘idea taken formally’ and ‘idea taken objectively’. Rather, we interpret their occurrence in line with the paraphrases we can give of them. In so far as there is any object it is simply the idea, which the different phrases indicate is being considered from different angles.

The two categories under ‘the thing’ are not scholastic-Cartesian categories, but are Ayers’s extension of that terminology. Again, although the terminology is not familiar, we can assign an interpretation to its use. Thus, if someone says ‘X as it exists objectively is F’, they can be taken to be saying ‘X is conceived of (believed to be) F (by someone).’ Whereas if someone says ‘X as it exists formally is F’, that can be taken to mean ‘X is actually/really F.’ The terminology can be taken to express these two things. But again I take it as obvious that ‘X as it exists objectively’ and ‘X as it exists formally’ are not referring expressions, but have an expressive role provided by the paraphrases.

If this is correct then a similar thing can be said about the central bottom phrase—‘The thing as it is conceived to be, in the mind’. Suppose that I say ‘London, as it is conceived to be in A’s mind, is F’, then I am merely saying ‘A conceives of London as F’ or ‘A believes that London is F.’ It is parallel to the following sentence: ‘London, as it described by A, is crowded’, which simply says ‘A described London as crowded.’ Again it is obvious that such paraphrases give the significance of these expressions, and that they do not work by referring to any object.

It follows that the phrase ‘the thing as it is conceived of, in the mind’ is not a genuine referring expression and that it cannot be used to define two genuine identity propositions, the truth of which needs to be decided. Both identity propositions are discredited in consequence. But the right-hand identity also contains the expression ‘The thing as it is in reality, in itself’, which is also a non-designating expression.

I conclude that the two suggested identities are not properly defined, and so should not be elements in a genuine framework.

(2) I have just argued that the 'identities' are not genuine identities. However, we should be sympathetic and ask as what genuine propositions the two pseudo-identities might be best re-expressed. In so far as we are looking for genuine propositions we need to start by scrutinising the middle notion of the bottom three, that is, 'things as we conceive of them, in the mind' because this figures in both pseudo-propositions. A problem with that expression has now to be faced. One example of a 'thing as I conceive of it' would be 'Oxford as I conceive of it'. Now, in talking that way I am talking of a set of propositions which are about Oxford and which I accept. (In Quine's terminology, we are talking of my theory of Oxford). Are the propositions that we wish to formulate in our sympathetic reconstruction of the framework to be taken to relate to our theories of things? It seems to me to fit Ayers's intentions better to ignore the idea of a theory and to try to formulate claims about the things our theories are of (or are about). I am guided here by Ayers's remark (p. 93) that 'ideas taken objectively' are also known as 'intentional objects'. We can say, then, that the two propositions are to be theses about what we think about, about the content of our thoughts. What theses should they be?

The framework that Ayers gives us employs the notion of identity, and there is a temptation to try to re-express them using that notion. This, however, seems to lead nowhere for well-known reasons. Thus, we might try to reformulate the left identity as follows: the intentional object is (identical with) the idea (of the object). That claim would have the unfortunate implication that instead of thinking about Oxford or looking for Atlantis I have been thinking of my idea of Oxford and searching for my idea of Atlantis. If the left hand identity is absurd, the right hand one, interpreted as an identity, is a truism, for when the intentional object of my thought is Oxford the thing I have thought about is (identical with) Oxford itself. Employing identity in the reformulation leaves us with a choice between an absurdity and a truism, and so the invitation to employ that notion should be refused.

If identity and the pseudo-singular terms are abandoned, then there is, as far as I can work out, one way to interpret the framework. On this interpretation the left proposition is regarded as the claim that the content of thought is determined by features

that are intrinsic to the thinker. Ayers, quite naturally, takes Descartes to be saying that the content of a thought is determined by its form, and, assuming that the form of something is intrinsic to it, takes Descartes to be endorsing the left proposition. That is why he calls it the Cartesian stance. So on this suggested reading we might say that the left proposition represents a sort of view that has recently been called content internalism, content anti-individualism, content as narrow content, or what Putnam snappily expressed as the thought that content 'is in the head'. The right hand proposition can therefore be taken to express the view, or sort of view, known as content externalism, content anti-individualism, content as broad content, or, in Putnam's words, 'content isn't in the head'.

Having arrived at this point, we have an interpretation of Ayers's framework. The chief stumbling block with it as a framework (on this interpretation) is that it is too vague to use. I shall detail some reasons for saying this.

First, if we are offered a framework in which we face a choice between two propositions, then, if it supposed to be complete, one must be the negation of the other. In Ayers's framework which is the negative claim? Neither seems to be the negation of the other.⁹ Second, although the left hand proposition represents content internalism, that view, surely, cannot be that we never think about actual objects. I frequently think about Oxford, and then an actual place is what I am thinking of. But the way the left hand proposition is expressed suggests that impossible reading. Any plausible internalism must be formulated so as to be consistent with this obvious fact, but nowhere does Ayers explain how he understands it so that it is consistent with this fact. Third, there is a similar problem about the right hand proposition. It is obvious that sometimes we think about non-existent items. People have thought about the lost city of Atlantis, the supposed planet Vulcan, and (dare one say it given the Cartesian background?) God. No one could hold the unrestricted version of the right hand proposition. So what is the right hand proposition? Fourth, the right hand view suffers from another problem. If it is simply saying that we think, usually and often, about real

9. Since it seems that Ayers wishes to reject both propositions it may be that it is an advantage that they do not exhaust the possible views. It might have improved the framework, though, if it had depicted the proposition to be endorsed.

external objects, then that claim is, as we have seen, a truism, and it cannot therefore be a philosophical position. So what is the right hand proposition saying to render it a theory and not a truism?

The points that have just been made can be pulled together and re-expressed in a more general way. One type of philosophical issue that content ascriptions (for example, belief ascriptions) raise is what content ascriptions are true. This sort of issue can get controversial when, for example, we are comparing different cases, or considering special ones.¹⁰ I shall call this the ascription issue. A second sort of issue is, though, whether it can be said what makes the ascriptions that are true the correct ones. This issue might be pursued by providing partial analyses of the correct ascriptions. For example, it is obvious that someone might think that London (that is, that particular place) is a city, but it might be suggested that this is true only because the person thinks something of the form 'the F is a city', and London fits the description 'the F'. I shall call this the analytical issue. Third, there is the task of offering generalisations about content, such as theorists who talk of internalism or anti-individualism are doing, or at least suppose themselves to be doing. I shall call this the generalisation issue. The problem with Ayers's framework is that its formulation strongly suggests that he is saying something about what I have called the ascription issue. (Indeed, when Ayers discusses perception, that is precisely what he does argue about). For example, when he says that the left hand proposition 'is an ontological thesis that collapses the intentional objects of thought into ... the thoughts taken as intrinsic states of thinkers' (p. 94), it seems that he is saying that it is the contention that the content of our thought (its intentional objects) is an internal item and not an external object. Then it looks as if on Ayers's understanding of it the left hand proposition is outlawing such content ascriptions as 'He thinks that London is a city.' But then we hardly know what content ascriptions it is allowing in. Whereas, on this reading, the right hand proposition seems to be outlawing belief ascriptions such as 'He thinks that Atlantis still exists.' No credible position could outlaw that. My suggestion then is that

10. Think, for example, of disputes about the correct ascriptions that can be made of Swampman.

the way Professor Ayers handles the framework suggests a reading of it in which the positions are saying something about admissible content ascriptions, but nothing along those lines makes sense. Further, if he thinks that he has shown both the identified positions to be wrong, it is hard to read them as about anything but the ascription issue, since he does not really investigate what I have called the generalisation issue. But if they are to be read as about the ascription issue, it is quite unclear what the positions are. The only plausible reading locates the claims at what I have called the generalisation level, but then they are not precise enough to be helpful, nor are they thoroughly considered.

Fifth, Ayers's framework and his treatment pay no attention to an important distinction in the theory of thought content. The distinction is that between, roughly, the way thought can focus on individual items, and the way thought content is determined more generally. When Descartes makes his remark about form, understood in Ayers's way, it seems to imply that no content at all is determined by what is around the thinker (because it all a matter of the intrinsic form of thought). That, however, is a very extreme view, and my complaint is that I am not sure how strong a view the left proposition represents. I can illustrate this point using an example of Ayers's. He says; 'On this view (= the left hand view), in characterizing our ideas taken objectively we are characterizing our subjective mental states rather as, in characterizing Dürer's rhinoceros ('It is surely wearing armour'), we are characterizing Dürer's picture, not some real rhinoceros that my have served, directly or indirectly, as Dürer's model' (p. 94). We can, of course, say that Dürer painted a rhinoceros but that there was no particular rhinoceros that he painted. But are we to take it that the statement 'Dürer painted a rhinoceros' could be true whether or not there were such animals as rhinoceroses at all? This simply brings out that it is quite unclear whether the left hand proposition should be read as being about the direction of thought on individual objects or as being about the role of environment in content determination more generally. Sixth, a crucial term in the formulation is 'intrinsic'. Thus, Ayers expresses the left hand proposition in these words, 'It is an ontological thesis that collapses the intentional objects of thought into (specifying forms of) the thoughts taken as intrinsic states of

thinkers' (p. 94). What, though, is the force of 'intrinsic'? If we follow the lead of Descartes, then, since presumably the form of a thought is intrinsic to that very thought, the claim would be that the content is determined by something intrinsic to the individual act of thought. This is a remarkably extreme suggestion, no more credible really than the suggestion that linguistic meaning is determined by something intrinsic to the spoken sentence. What restrictions then are we to take 'intrinsic' to impose?¹¹ It remains unclarified.

I conclude that the framework fails to identify *helpfully* and *clearly* the significant alternative views about thought content. This is hardly surprising. A set of scholastic-Cartesian categories is no more likely to be the best available in current philosophy than in current science.

(3) There is something missing from the interpretation that I have developed so far. I have treated the framework as about the determination of thought content. It seems to me that this fits the centrality that Ayers gives to Descartes' remarks about ideas in his development of the framework.¹² However, throughout his

11. There is helpful clarification of the application of this notion in debates about thought content in Klein (1996).

12. The mention of Descartes means that this may be an appropriate point at which to insert a footnote relating to some aspects (and by no means all that deserve to be responded to) of Ayers's treatment of Descartes. (1) Ayers takes Descartes to be a proponent of the left hand proposition, that is, to be, roughly, an internalist about thought content. There is, though, the complication of Descartes' argument for the existence of God, which precisely claims that the existence of his idea of God requires that God exists, that is, having an idea with that content is only possible in a context in which there is a corresponding object. Does this make Descartes an externalist about the idea of God? I think that the answer to that question should be 'no', but it is no easy task to define externalism so as to avoid classifying Descartes that way. (2) Ayers attaches weight to what he treats as Descartes' remark that an idea taken objectively is 'that form of any given thought through the immediate apprehension of which I am conscious of that very thought'. First, though, this is a remarkably obscure remark, for what can Descartes mean by 'form'? Ayers appears to hold that in this context it is just another Cartesian word for content, but maybe Descartes thought that that having a thought was like apprehending an interior sentence, and so, with thought, as with language, there is a form to the representation on the basis of which significance is grasped. Ayers gives no reason to reject this account. And if it is correct this claim does not imply an internalist account of content, any more than the existence of linguistic form implies anything about linguistic content. Secondly, on Ayers's reading, where 'form' simply means 'content', Descartes is simply saying that when I grasp a thought I immediately grasp its content, and that implies nothing at all about what can figure in that content, or what determines it. So, even on Ayers's reading, it seems to imply nothing about how to read Descartes. Third, Ayers offers no evidence that the remark represents an important claim, rather than being something that slips out in discussion.

discussion, Ayers includes perception, as well as thought, in the framework. Thus, he talks of ‘a certain conceptual framework for representing the relation between thought (including experience) and its objects’ (p. 92). Indeed, in calling, as he does, the right hand view ‘direct realism’ Ayers uses a name which belongs to the philosophy of perception. Now, Ayers is quite right to suggest that we can apply to perceptual experiences questions that are parallel to those about thought. If we allow that perceptual experiences have content, then we can ask what is it that determines that content. We shall then have the two rough alternatives for perception as there were for thought. Ayers himself makes a very determined effort to decide which alternative is correct in his section entitled ‘Direct Realism Today’, which I shall discuss in part III. There are just two comments I wish to make at this point about the inclusion of perception in the framework. First, any criticisms of the clarity and elucidation of the options for thought will similarly be applicable to the options for perception. Second, it seems to me that nothing is to be gained, either for historical understanding or philosophical clarity, by presenting a single framework that generalises over *both* thought *and* perception. It has been a hard won insight in opposition to the tendencies of seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy to keep perception and thought separate, so why obliterate that distinction now?

(4) Having set up the two views, which I hope that I have interpreted correctly, Ayers presents, as far as I can see, only one argument, from Descartes, in favour of the left-hand proposition. It runs; ‘Since we can be aware of that [= the thing-as-we-conceive-of-it], and know how it is, even when, for all we know, the thing-as-it-exists-formally is very different, or even when there is *no* formally existing thing correspondent to the thing “in our mind”, it would seem to follow that to describe a thing-as-we-conceive-of-it is not to give an account of anything *beyond* “the form of our thought”’ (p. 94). Ayers does not say what value this argument has, apart from describing it as ‘reasonable’, so we need to ask whether it does support the left-hand proposition. Now, the premise is rather complicated, but on one reading it may be simplified to the claim that it is possible to know that one is thinking a thought with content C and to not know whether object O exists. Would it follow from this that the C-thought is not essentially about O, and hence has a content that

does not entail that O exists? The answer is that it is quite possible to know that P, where P entails Q, and not know that Q. I can know that there are 12 people in the room and not know that there 36 divided by 3 people in the room. So the data in the premise seems to give no immediate support to the conclusion.¹³

(5) Having considered how the framework should be understood, in particular the two propositions defined in its terms, it needs to be asked what Professor Ayers's own view is about those propositions. In his Abstract he indicates that he rejects both views, and that this allows him to develop his new robust realism. In his paper the closest he comes to making this clear, as far as I can see, is when he says; 'We ordinarily move around within the language mapped by the scholastic-Cartesian schema, sometimes taking (as it were) the direct realist stance, sometimes the "Cartesian stance", and that is how we deal conceptually with intentionality. ... What needs to be explained is what it is about cognition and representation that allows this flexible, seemingly incoherent conceptual structure to work so well' (p. 105).

This is, then, Ayers's response, and so part of what must be counted as his own answer to his basic question, but in the light of what has been said it is not entirely unpuzzling. First, is he maintaining this view for both thought content and perceptual content? If so, what is puzzling is that he talks on the next page (p. 106), in relation to perception, of the validity of the 'Cartesian stance', and also the main thrust of his argument about perception, if I have understood it, seems to be to exclude object-involving perceptual content. Second, since I have argued that, in the absence of serious reconstruction, there is no way to understand the supposed propositions, it does not convey much to be told that his position is one that rejects them. Third, it cannot possibly be right to say that we 'take one stance' and then another, because the stances represent, presumably, universal theoretical claims which are inconsistent, and we surely do not, on one occasion, say something (make one content ascription) which

13. This comment relates to what Ayers calls the 'metaphysical music' (p. 93). Before the music starts he seems to be saying that the 'objective/formal' terminology amounts to recognising an ambiguity in 'idea' like the generally agreed ambiguity in 'statement', between taking it to refer to the act of stating or to the content of the statement. But if that is the point, indeed Descartes' point, how can the Cartesian position be then represented as the claim there is an identity between them?

commits us to one stance, and then on another say something (make another content ascription) committing ourselves to the other stance.

II

Direct Realism. If, like Professor Ayers, you are a realist in his sense, and presumably just about everyone is, you will want to explain how we can think about and gain knowledge of (and justified belief about) the real external spatial world. It is quite obvious that perception underpins both of these cognitive achievements, and so a tenable realism must incorporate a tenable account of perception. Ayers argues that a currently popular version of direct realism, which he calls the disjunctive analysis, does not provide a tenable account.

Before though considering his reading and assessment of that position, it is worth asking what positive general account of perception Ayers himself recommends. One reason for hesitation in answering this question is that although the position he attacks is specified by an 'ism', he uses no name to specify his own theory. There is a second reason for hesitation, which is that, although most of the discussion seems to commit itself to one approach, some things that are said indicate a different approach. Thus for most of the time, the account would seem to be this: in perception, we have, or enjoy, experiences that are internal, intrinsic to the subject, occurrences with content. Such experiences can be caused in a variety of ways, and amongst these ways some confer upon experiences the status of perceptions of one's environment and of certain objects in it. It may be, though, that we cannot provide a reductive specification of the type of cause necessary for the resulting experience to be perceptual. The content which an experience possesses, though, does not depend on what cause it has: the experience possesses its content intrinsically, whether or not it has the sort of cause which constitutes it a perception of a real object.

There are, though, some things that Ayers says that seem rather closer to what a direct realist would say. Thus he says; 'The structure of the perceived world ... is physical structure in the most literal sense, in the sense in which a house has structure. ... In the sense experience involved in that interaction [= perception and action] we are presented with structural features of the

world, chunks and masses of matter variously disposed around us' (pp. 108–9). It is clearly possible to reconcile this passage with the general account sketched above by reading it as simply saying what content experiences have: in them it appears to the subject as if there are items with structure and accretions of matter. That is, I think, how we should read Ayers's proposal. But it would not be an inappropriate reading of the words that Ayers uses to understand them as affirming that the world presented in perception (that is, the content of those experiences) is the real physical world. We are, that is to say, presented with the real world. But we cannot, presumably, be presented with the actual world, with its manifest structure, in an experience that is hallucinatory. If not, Ayers own way of speaking suggests a disjunctive approach to the content of experience.

In fact, the progress of thought in the paragraph I am examining is problematic. Ayers is opposing the suggestion that perceptual content is, as it is said, conceptual by suggesting that perceptual structure is literally, really, physical structure. But given the general account which Ayers is proposing he should merely say that the structure in the content of experience is non-conceptual, a structure available in principle for experiences which are totally hallucinatory and which, in that case, can hardly involve real chunks of anything.

To return though to Ayers's main discussion of perception, his target is what he sees as a recently propounded direct realism. This doctrine, according to Ayers, divides the experiences with which it deals into two sorts that have distinct and non-overlapping contents. First, if an experience is perceptual, is, for example, the sighting of a real horse, then the content of the experience involves that object which is the horse. There is, further, no lesser content also possessed by the experience which it could share either with other perceptual experiences in which a similar but numerically distinct horse is seen, or with hallucinatory experiences in which, as we say, such a horse is hallucinated. Second, there are such 'hallucinatory states or the like', and with them the ascription of content is to be analysed as saying that it is for the subject as if such or such things were being perceived.¹⁴ A crucial element in this view is, according to Ayers,

14. A reason for saying that all is not quite right with Ayers's characterisation of the new direct realism is that according to his formulation the view tells us what *content* perceptions have but tells us what the *analysis* of content is for non-perceptual cases.

that there is no common content shared between the first type of experience and the second type.

Let me call this thesis NR (short for New Realism). NR cannot be properly assessed, or understood, until the notion of content in terms of which it is stated has received some clarification. The way Ayers speaks suggests that talk of the content of perceptual or hallucinatory experiences is a technical way of expressing what normal talk of appearance expresses. Thus he says; 'The analogy with belief and knowledge ... suggests that there is not all that much wrong with the idea that we can consider how things appear to a subject without regard to what, if anything, the subject is actually perceiving' (p. 104). He evidently regards considering how things appear as the same as his sort of content assignment. So I shall understand NR as a thesis about appearance content, which I shall refer to as A-content. More clarification is needed of the significance of NR as understood by Ayers, but some of it will emerge as we consider the case he makes against it.

I think that there are three main arguments that Ayers proposes in his paper against NR that I shall consider in turn.

(1) The Scepticism Argument.

Ayers first observation is this: NR is 'a less than sure prophylactic against scepticism, since it leaves room for mental states of the allegedly distinct logical types, perceptual and hallucinatory, that are subjectively ... indistinguishable: e.g., one's seeing an elephant, and its being merely as if one were seeing an elephant' (p. 104). In response to this remark I have four immediate observations. (i) It should certainly be agreed that NR is not a sure prophylactic against scepticism. NR, straightforwardly understood, merely says that if an experience is genuinely perceptual then it has one sort of object involving content, but if it is hallucinatory then it has another sort of non-object involving content. This thesis provides no immediate help in telling or even forming justified beliefs about what sort of experience one's current experience is, or, indeed, what one's experiences ever have been. (ii) Agreeing to this, however, provides no criticism of the truth of NR. The correct comment merely says that NR does not, on its own, answer scepticism, but lots of true claims do not do that. (iii) We need to distinguish between saying that NR does not on

its own answer scepticism and saying that it is not an essential part of an answer to scepticism. Since Ayers does not really consider how to answer scepticism, he provides no reason to claim that NR is no help with the correct response to scepticism. The anti-sceptical value of NR remains to be determined.¹⁵ (iv) The impression that Ayers gives in treating the failure of NR on its own to block scepticism is that supporters of NR have held that it is, by itself, a 'sure prophylactic against scepticism'. I believe that there is little evidence that supporters of the type of position that NR is supposed to summarise or represent have held such a view. Thus, Hinton's writings aim to oppose a certain conception of the nature of experience and do not pay much attention to scepticism or knowledge.¹⁶ McDowell employs the disjunctive conception in answering something like the argument from illusion, but answering that is hardly a complete refutation of scepticism.

(2) The Bracketing Argument

Ayers's next, and, I believe, main objection to NR is that 'we can consider how things appear to a subject without regard to what, if anything, the subject is actually perceiving' (p. 104). He puts the same point later in a familiar language: 'It is certainly possible to consider the content of any experience while bracketing off its actual object' (p. 107). I shall call this the Bracketing Argument.

Two questions immediately arise. Is Ayers right to suggest that we can consider the content of an experience while remaining neutral as to whether anything is actually being perceived? If he is, is it inconsistent with NR? The standard, and I believe, obviously correct answer to this first question is we can do that. When Ayers talks about content he means A-content, and it seems quite clear that we can both be asked to, and can, describe how things appear whilst remaining neutral about whether we are perceiving an actual object. Thus, I can certainly say, in response to such a request, 'It looks to me as if there is a table, but I am not saying whether there is a table or whether I am hallucinating.' Indeed, Anscombe pointed out long ago that we can understand such a

15. I have discussed some aspects of this issue in Snowdon (1992), sect. 8.

16. See Hinton (1973), *passim*.

request even if we employ a perceptual verb (such as 'see' or 'hear') in posing it. We can say to someone, 'Just describe what you see, and don't worry about what is actually there.' Out of this possibility grows the claim that perceptual verbs themselves have an intentional sense. Whether there really is such a sense is unimportant for us, but what Anscombe is describing here is simply Ayers's bracketing possibility. It is, therefore, the second question that is important.

The central point in the first response I shall make to this question is that NR is perfectly consistent with the bracketing possibility. It is consistent with bracketing because it treats the appearance judgement that emerges as disjunctive. Thus, when S says in response to a bracketing request that 'It looks to me as if there is a table', he can be regarded as saying, 'Either I am seeing something which looks to be a table or it is merely as if I am.' In fact, Hinton's original motive for focusing on what he called perception-illusion disjunctions was precisely that they had the status of reports that one can make while remaining neutral as to whether what was occurring was a perception. One role for disjunctions in the type of theory Ayers is attacking has precisely been to give an account or theory of bracketing, which can hardly, therefore, in itself be a phenomenon that rules the theory out.

In thinking about what NR can say about bracketing we should not become fixated on disjunctions. We can notice and exploit the fact that ' $P \vee Q$ ' is equivalent to ' $\neg P \rightarrow Q$ '. So, in describing what someone who is bracketing says, it is hardly outrageous to treat it this way: 'If it is not the case that some perceived object is looking to be a table to me, then it is (certainly) merely as if it that were so.'

Once the disjunctive analytical proposal has been put on the table, how might the bracketing objection be continued? One way would be to say that the disjunctive analysis is irrelevant, since NR as characterised has already been refuted. Thus, NR says that there is no content common between hallucination and perceptual experience. Appearance judgements just are content ascriptions. So, whatever analysis is offered of the common appearance judgements in such cases, it has been conceded that there is common content. But this attempt to keep the objection going simply invites the reply that, if NR is even to approximate

to a view that anyone holds, then the agreed truth that an appearance judgement can apply in both perceptual and non-perceptual cases should not be allowed to refute it, since that was what this type of view was intended to allow. The correct way to continue the argument would be to object to the proposed disjunctive analysis, but Ayers's paper contains no such argument.¹⁷

There is, however, a second critical remark to make about the way that Ayers structures the debate. In his debate NR says that there is no content in common between perception and hallucination, though I have suggested that we must modify that—if there is shared content it is disjunctively analysed. If we understand NR that way, then, I have argued, Ayers has not established that it is wrong. However, I want to allow for the sake of argument that there is what might be described as possible common content which should not be disjunctively analysed. The alternative position that Ayers appears to support is that content is sharable between the cases. He does not seem to allow that there can be content which requires the presence of a perceived object.¹⁸ To suppose that perceptual content does not require the existence of objects would most likely lead one to the view that one should report perceptual appearances in existential terms; one should say, for example, that it looks to S as if there is a table. It is obvious though that there is a third possible viewpoint. This would say that in perceptual cases there is a content

17. In discussion Ayers argued against the disjunctive analysis on the basis of the principle that in order to make a contingent disjunctive assertion the disjunction must be inferred from something. If this is correct and the disjunctive analysis implies that we do make what it regards as disjunctive judgements but not on the basis of inference, then the analysis is wrong. This is certainly an interesting problem, but I think that the disjunctivist has some room to manoeuvre. First, it may be that we sometimes do make disjunctive judgements in immediate response to experience, that is, non-inferentially. For example, you see a group of people, but can only judge straight off that there were either four or five, but you could not tell which. Second, bracketing 'looks'-judgements are a special and complex case. Thus, one is told, or understands, that one is to judge how things look on the assumption that it is not known whether this is a case of perception or not. So, it might be suggested, one first assumes it is a perceptual case and then judges, and then one assumes it is not and judges, and disjoins the verdicts. This is not intended to be an accurate account of what happens, but merely to reduce the sense that a disjunctive analysis generates an epistemological absurdity.

18. I remain somewhat unsure whether Professor Ayers is against both NR and what I shall call RNR, and favours what he might call a Cartesian approach to perceptual content (though not to thought content), or whether his main point is that NR is wrong, and he would accept RNR.

that is real-object involving and which is not available in hallucinatory cases, even though some content can be shared. This position is not NR as characterised by Ayers, but neither is it the view he wishes to adopt. I shall call it Revised New Realism (RNR). The point that has just been made is that even if NR is rejected no reason has been given to reject RNR as well.

We have, then, three different views on the relation between the A-contents that are available in cases of perception and those that are available in cases of hallucination. Of these three views, I wish to argue, somewhat sketchily, that the one I am thinking of as Ayers's view is problematic. The argument, or line of thought, attempts to exploit links between the notions of knowledge, perception and appearance. The general idea is that these psychological notions, and of course, others, are embedded in, and related through, certain explanatory principles. Of course, this may not be the correct way to think of how these phenomena relate, or it may be that the explanatory principles hinted at here are not the correct ones. However, if we are to be realists we shall wish to preserve our ordinary belief that we know about the real spatial world. Now, a fundamental requirement of S's knowing that P is that there is an answer (not necessarily known) to the question: how does S know that P? How, then, do we know about the spatial world? The fundamental answer is, of course, that we perceive our environment. We are so related to items around us that we can perceive that they are a certain way. We know that certain items are a certain way because we can, for example, see that those self same items are that very way. How does this relate to the content of appearance? The relevant link here is that one can see that P only if it looks as if P. This, of course, is only an implication of a more fundamental and general explanatory principle about appearances, which I shall not attempt to give. Putting these truisms together we get the consequence that in ordinary perception (if it is to yield knowledge of the spatial world) it must usually appear to the percipient that, say, that particular object is a certain way. The A-content of ordinary perception must have genuine *de re* content.¹⁹

The correctness of these steps, if they are correct, does indicate that perceptual content is not merely existential. It does not

19. This little argument supports in a different way the conclusion in Snowdon (1992) sect. 8.

immediately establish that there is a contrast between the content of perceptual and non-perceptual experiences, since it may be a mistake to think that non-perceptual content is solely existential. About hallucinatory content I wish to advance two points. (1) On our ordinary understanding of hallucinations, they can have *de re* content. Thus, Hamlet might be said to have hallucinated that his father was before him, and not simply that there was someone like his father before him (though I am not offering that as a correct reading of the play!). Equally I can say to someone, 'When I was hallucinating, it seemed to me that I was speaking to you.' (2) Typically, though, the scope for *de re* content in hallucinatory experiences is less than it is with perceptual experiences. An hallucinating subject surrounded by objects does not have the right contact with those objects to make it the case that it appears to the subject that a particular one of them is a certain way. We can put the contrast as follows. Hallucinatory experiences come, in some sense, from inside us, and so they can relate to items with which you are already acquainted, items that figure already, as we might say, in your map of the world. In contrast, perceptual experience is a way of getting acquainted with new things in the world, thereby putting items onto your map. Perception extends the range of things you are acquainted with; hallucinatory experience merely draws on established acquaintance.

Questions can no doubt be raised about this line of thought, but I want to ask where, if it is acceptable, we are left in relation to Professor Ayers's discussion. The point, or at least a point, that I am trying to make is that, as I read his approach, Ayers wishes to adopt an account of the content of appearance which is dubious on fairly commonsensical grounds, and which many philosophers who might not think of themselves as disjunctivists would not wish to accept. In favour of this extreme approach Ayers seems to offer no support beyond rejecting another view, where the two views do not actually exhaust the possibilities.

(3) The Essential Role of Intrinsically Contentful Subjectivity in Cognition.

The third argument that I wish to comment on comes on page 106. Ayers starts with the thought, ascribed to supporters of NR, that 'my perceiving the sun is ... as purely a relational property

of me as being perceived is a relational property of the sun'. Ayers, as I read him, rejects this claim because perception essentially involves intrinsically contentful subjective states which 'lie within' the percipient.

I do not intend to discuss this argument at length, partly because its presentation is very brief, but also because it raises extremely deep issues. Rather, I shall respond by making a series of comments. (1) The terminology of a 'purely relational property' is puzzling. As Ayers himself agrees perceiving is a relation. But whether it is a *pure* relation depends on what that means, and Ayers does not define the term. The intuitive idea seems to be that a relation is pure in respect of individual X if for X to stand in that relation to Y does not require X to be any particular way internally (or intrinsically). If that is what is meant, then there is no justification for supposing that anyone holds that seeing, for example, is a pure relation, and hence no reason to argue that it is not a pure relation.²⁰ (2) However, Ayers's argument is not sensibly thought of as an objection to the more or less incredible claim that seeing is a pure relation. Rather he seems to be affirming the two following premises.

- (A) If S perceives an item O then S must undergo (or enjoy) an inner contentful conscious state or experience.
- (B) The content of such an inner experience does not depend on anything external to the experience. (The content is intrinsic and not due to anything outside the experience.)

Premise (B) is what Ayers is supporting when he contrasts the dependence of the content of pictures and speech on things which are external to them (by which I take it he means the people employing or responding to them) with the lack of dependence on external things of the content of consciousness. So the question is how we should respond to an argument built on these claims. (3) What is the conclusion that Ayers thinks can be drawn? Whatever that is, nothing follows immediately about content, because nothing is said in the premises about what content can be intrinsic to an inner experience. Since Ayers allows

20. I owe to Tom Stoneham the point that some philosophers in the past, for example, Berkeley, may have held that perception is a pure relation.

that inner experiences can have what he illuminatingly calls ‘out-reaching’ content, that is content which relates to the subject’s environment, whatever the environment contains, why cannot they in principle have *de re* content, whatever the environment contains? To draw any conclusions extra premises need adding. (4) Further, premise (B) is more or less simply assumed. It is simply not a self-evident truth. Moreover, if someone is convinced that (A) is a true thesis about perception, they should be prepared to query (B), for it may be that (A) plus (B) plus certain other assumptions locks one into a view with difficulties (something I have already argued). Ayers is also misled by the way he contrasts experience content with pictorial content. What he seems to think is that the content of a picture depends on how people external to the picture react to it. He then points out, quite correctly, that experiential content does not in this way depend on the response to it of people who are external to it (as he says, ‘*pace* interpretationism’). But that observation does not support the claim that perceptual content cannot depend on anything at all external to the experience. (5) Ayers takes premise (A) as more or less obviously true, but in so doing he is simply ignoring one approach to experience which so-called disjunctivists have explored and promoted. Thus, one theme of disjunctivism is the denial of a ‘common visual element’ in both perception and hallucination. Now, proposition (A), despite not being an explicit affirmation of a common visual element, since it says nothing about hallucination, would naturally lead to the common visual element view. Although Ayers specifies the inner states as contentful perceptual states, he would, presumably, hold that differently caused but subjectively similar inner states would have the same content. Labelling them ‘perceptual’ does not, therefore, properly capture their basic nature, on the view that Ayers is proposing. Disjunctivists, in contrast, have attempted to formulate an account of experience that does not endorse the common visual element thesis. One expression of this approach can be found in the following words of William Child. He puts the debate in these words; ‘Should we treat what is common to vision and hallucination as an ingredient, a complete mental entity (as the non-disjunctivists say)? Or should we rather (with the disjunctivist) treat the only complete part of mental reality as being, on the one hand, cases of vision and, on the other hand,

cases of hallucination?"²¹ Child acknowledges, as everyone does, that such disjunctivism is difficult to defend and articulate, but nonetheless does there defend it.

There are, I believe, two significant consequences of having brought the discussion to this point. The first is that it should be recognised that Ayers by simply affirming (A) is ignoring a, indeed perhaps the, core element in disjunctivism. The second, and more important point, is that the characterisation of the New Realism that Ayers has been working with, a characterisation simply in terms of A-content, is not an ideal way to formulate the debate. His discussion completely fails to engage with formulations of disjunctivism in terms of the claim that the experience when there is a perception is of a different nature to the experience when there is an hallucination.

It would be fair for those sympathetic to the direction of Ayers's argument to respond to this second point by saying that it is the responsibility of proponents of this approach to perception to formulate it precisely. I agree, although I have not used this occasion to attempt that task. My point is, rather, to argue that Ayers has not assembled powerful evidence for saying that it would be wrong to incorporate an account of perception along disjunctivist lines within his defensible realism.²²

III

Ayers's Answer. By the end, what is Ayers's answer to his own question? He does not construct a complete theory of perception, and certainly not an account of how knowledge of the spatial world is possible. Of the two, though, at least the main direction of Ayers's account of perception is clear. In perception physical objects cause internal contentful states (of a kind and with a content also possible in hallucinations); the presence of concepts is

21. Child (1994), p. 145.

22. It was felt by some in the discussion of Professor Ayers's paper that the type of formulation of disjunctivism that I am claiming his paper ignores is itself in difficulty in the light of the fact that we can say things like this; having an hallucination can give you the same experience as seeing something. How, then, can one say they are different types of experience? The immediate and not very forthcoming answer is that we can recognise a use of 'same experience' in which they are the same, but can define another sense in which they may still be different types of experience. Straight thinking about perception might need such a distinction. It should be agreed that much more needs to be said here.

not involved in the occurrence of these contentful experiential states. He rejects both disjunctivism and the thesis that perceptual content is concept involving, and proposes an account of perceptual content which is not object-involving or externalist. (In passing I want to remark that there is, as far as I can see, no reason to link disjunctivism with the idea that perceptual content is conceptual. Some people maintain both, but there is no necessary link between them). This much is clear about Ayers's interesting answer, but there are two other aspects of his conclusion that I cannot easily understand.

The first theme that is hard to understand is that which Ayers is expressing in such words as the following: 'Realism *tout court* ... should be the view that reality *structures* experience and so thought. We are that closely in touch with it' (p. 110). Again, 'In sense perception we are presented, pre-theoretically and pre-conceptually, with the real, physical, independent structure of the world' (pp. 109–10). What kind of closeness or presentation is Ayers thinking of? He has denied that concepts are a necessary element in perceptual consciousness, and so can say that there is no lack of closeness induced by the involvement of concepts. But if that is the basic point there are two things to say. First, why would perceptual experience be more indirect if the caused internal state involved concepts than if it did not? Second, within Ayers's theory it is still the case that the perceptual experiences themselves are at best causally related to the external world. The role of the external objects with their structure is merely, as he puts it, to cause ripples. So the distinction between the real structure of the surrounding bodies and the structure as represented in our experiences still remains.

The second theme is Ayers's closing remark that, on his view, 'the supposed problem of comparing 'conceptual scheme' with reality does not arise' (p. 110). There is, of course, a reading of the talk of comparison on which such a thing is impossible, but Ayers makes it clear that he is not appealing to that reading. So why does the problem not arise? It seems to me that Ayers's model generates the possibility of asking such questions. Thus let us suppose that our perceptual experience represents our environment as containing substances (though not, of course, in virtue of involving the concept of substance). Following Ayers, we can recognise that this is simply a feature of our perceptual

experiences and ask whether the real external world contains such items. We can, that is, compare, using argument and theory, such a fundamental notion and the real world. Ayers's neo-Lockean model precisely yields such questions and tasks. I am not claiming this as a fault, but rather voicing puzzlement at Ayers's idea that such questions do not arise.

IV

Conclusion. I have concentrated on some of the aspects of Ayers's discussion about which I am sceptical, rather than on the many insightful elements in it. I hope that I have understood it enough to make a case for saying that not all the elements in his conception of realism are obligatory.

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