Realism, like ice cream, comes in many different flavors. This is a progress report on the relationship of cognitive foundationalism and metaphysical realism. In a short paper, it will not be possible to investigate this relationship in detail. I will nonetheless do my best to point to avenues for further discussion.

“Realism” is usually understood to refer to the ontological independence of the cognitive object, that is, its independence with respect to our beliefs, knowledge, conceptual frameworks and so on. Realism is routinely either explicitly invoked or at least presupposed as a criterion for knowledge. All claims for knowledge are without exception claims for knowledge of the real, but there are many different kinds of realism. For instance, social realism, which is often promoted by Marxism, suggests socially realist art either enables or at least helps more than any other artistic style in knowing social reality, which we otherwise could not know or perhaps not know as well.

Realism is the dominant element in the cognitive debate. The type of realism one accepts determines the cognitive strategy one chooses. The acceptance of one particular type of realism rather than another as the standard of knowledge leads in turn to specific epistemological strategies, such as cognitive foundationalism, strategies which are formulated in order to justify particular realist claims to know.

The Western cognitive tradition is strongly influenced by an early commitment to what later became metaphysical realism. Metaphysical realism is any form of the cognitive claim that to know requires a cognitive grasp of reality, or in other words the mind-independent external world as it is, not merely as it appears. Metaphysical realism, though not under that name, runs throughout the entire Western tradition at least since Parmenides. His basic
ontological claim, that is, that what is is and cannot not be hence cannot change, influentially creates a central philosophical task. The Parmenidean ontological view has been understood over the millennia as calling for cognition of reality as the standard of knowledge.

Parmenides influences Plato and through him the later debate. The view that to know requires a cognitive grasp of mind-independent reality, which was adopted by Plato, echoes throughout the entire later Western tradition. Plato’s realism about universals is associated with his intuitionism about knowledge of the mind-independent real.

Though there are probably as many epistemic models as there are thinkers interested in knowledge, there are finally only a few basic approaches. In ancient philosophy, the two main cognitive strategies are intellectual intuition and representation. In the Republic, Socrates talks about carrying around a mirror in order to reflect reality. This is probably the first version of what later became the reflection theory of knowledge, which Lenin, following Engels, officially adopted.

Plato rejects mimetic art in calling for the expulsion of artists, poets and other non-philosophers concerned with knowledge from the city. Since mimesis is a form of representation, in criticizing mimesis, Plato rejects any form of representation in favor of intellectual intuition. In other words, restated in causal language, in which the representation is the effect of the mind-independent world, one can say that Plato rejects any inference from effect to cause. In place of a causal theory of perception, Plato appears to makes one of two points in arguing for an intuitive approach to knowledge: either some selected individuals on grounds of nature and nurture can intuit the real, or if knowledge is to be possible there must be some selected individuals who on grounds of nature and nurture can intuit the real.

In the modern debate, there are many efforts to reverse the Platonic rejection of representationalism in formulating a causal theory of perception, which links together an idea in the mind to the mind-independent world. This view is common to rationalism and empiricism, which, though they otherwise differ, both feature a cognitive relation between ideas and reality. In a causal theory of perception, the idea in the mind is the effect for which the mind-independent world is the cause. Rationalism and empiricism are the two main forms of the new way of ideas as distinguished from the old way of ideas or Platonism. Both rationalism and empiricism suggest cognition depends on the relation of ideas in the mind to mind-independent reality, more precisely on the backwards or anti-Platonic inference from the effect to its cause.
Cognitive representation is problematic since there seems to be no way to know that representations match up with, correspondent to or otherwise correctly represent the cognitive object. The main criticism is simple but devastating. If access to the cognitive object is only possible through the representation, then there is no way to know how the representation relates to what it represents, hence no way to argue for the success of a representational approach to knowledge. This criticism, which seems to vindicate Plato’s rejection of the backward inference from effect to cause, appears to undermine any and all modern forms of representationalism.

In the modern debate, skepticism, foundationalism, and metaphysical realism are closely linked. Foundationalism exploits the analogy between a building, which is constructed on solid, or unshakeable foundations, and the correct epistemic strategy. “Epistemic foundationalism” refers to any strategy for knowledge based on an initial principle or set of principles known to be absolutely certain.

Foundationalism, which is a peculiarly rigorous form of the causal theory of perception, is a strategy to avoid skepticism while arguing for cognitive claims beyond the possibility of doubt. Foundationalism is intended to defeat skepticism through realism. Modern foundationalism has two aims. First, it is intended to overcome any and all kinds of epistemic skepticism. This difficulty looms larger in modern than in ancient philosophy. Second, epistemic foundationalism is intended to satisfy the criterion of metaphysical realism, hence to meet the standard proposed by Parmenides.

Epistemic foundationalism, which assumes different forms, has always been beset with difficulties. When foundationalism comes into the tradition depends on what one understands it to be. Plato’s suggestion that mathematics and natural science depend on first principles which can be grasped through dialectic and which guarantee all forms of knowledge is perhaps an early form of foundationalism.

In the Republic Plato seems to suggest all knowledge must be based on initial principles, which, through dialectic, are known to be true. Aristotle develops this Platonic suggestion. According to Aristotle, there are certain, true and primary principles, from which the conclusion follows. Aristotle thinks that to avoid either an infinite regress or circular reasoning, the premises on which demonstration is based must either be demonstrable or not require demonstration since as first principles they cannot be demonstrated but are self-evidently true.
There are two standard objections to this analysis. First, one may claim that scientific knowledge is not indemonstrable but necessarily demonstrable, hence falls into an infinite regress. Aristotle answers this objection in claiming without demonstration that there must be basic propositions or knowledge is impossible. The second objection is that in certain instances circular reasoning is permissible.

In modern times, foundationalism takes different forms, above all in the Cartesian position. Cartesian foundationalism is basically a highly systematic approach to knowledge. According to Kant, cognition must be scientific, and science requires the unity of different cognitions under a single idea or principle. The Kantian conception of scientific system is strongly influenced by Descartes. Descartes, who is equally important in mathematics and philosophy, relies on a geometrical model in formulating his philosophical approach.

Geometry depends on axioms or postulates whose truth is assumed for purposes of demonstration in order to deduce theorems. Descartes takes the geometrical model further in making apodictic claims for knowledge. According to Descartes, there is a single foundationalist principle, or unshakeable Archimedean point, known to be true, and the remainder of the theory can be rigorously deduced from it. It follows that if the theory is rigorously deduced from a principle known to be true, then the theory is also true.

The Aristotelian and the Cartesian approaches differ in their understanding of the foundational, basic or first principles. Aristotle argues there must be such principles in order to have knowledge, which Descartes undertakes to demonstrate through his conception of the cogito. In comparison, Descartes can be said to improve on the Aristotelian approach in identifying a cognitive first principle, or foundation for cognition.

The deceptively simple modern Cartesian foundationalist cognitive approach is theoretically interesting but difficult to defend in practice. This model, which depends on a causal theory of perception, argues from an idea in the mind to the mind-independent external world in order to defeat the most radical form of skepticism. The Cartesian argument for knowledge is based on the cogito, or a conception of the subject, which cannot be false, hence is therefore true. The many objections, which have been raised against Cartesian foundationalism, all concern the difficulty of making a justified inference from ideas in the mind of the subject to the mind-independent external world.

Descartes’ key argument is that the cogito, which is necessarily true, permits an apodictic cognitive inference to the mind-external world as it is. According to Descartes, the cogito exists, since its
existence cannot be denied, and, since, clear and distinct ideas are true since God would not deceive me, we can reliably determine which ideas in the mind are true.

This argument has generated an enormous debate. Many commentators, beginning with Arnauld, suggest that the Cartesian argument is circular in pointing to the so-called Cartesian circle. This criticism consists in pointing out that Descartes appears to rely on the existence of God, which he has not yet demonstrated, to infer that clear and distinct ideas are true. Descartes responded in several ways, of which the most important is that clear and distinct ideas do not depend upon God to validate them. Suffice it to say that the argument about the Cartesian circle has never been decided.

Others who criticize Cartesian foundationalism include Fichte and Hegel. Thus Fichte revives circular demonstration earlier rejected by Aristotle. Fichte, like Aristotle, rejects the very idea of demonstrating an initial or foundational principle, but unlike Aristotle he does not accept but rather rejects cognitive foundationalism. Hegel distinguishes between certainty and truth in opposing the inference from ideas in the mind to reality.

In the twentieth century, a new form of foundationalism emerged in the Vienna Circle. According to Carnap’s protocol theory, sentences about physical objects are not translated into sense data but into protocol sentences in order to weave a seamless web between immediate experience and natural science. Carnap’s initiative [see Carnap 1932] quickly led to a complex debate between himself, Neurath [see Neurath 1932], Quine [see Quine 1951] and others, most recently Rorty [see Rorty 1979]. Neurath’s objection there were in fact no protocols led Carnap to reformulate his position in ideal language. This was opposed by Quine’s denial of the basic Kantian distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions in shifting toward holism [see Quine 1951]. Following Quine, Davidson and Sellars both separately criticize foundationalism. Davidson refutes empiricism on the grounds a belief can only be grounded through another belief [see Davidson 1986]. Sellars attacks what he calls the myth of the given [see Sellars 1956]. Rorty, who seems to take analytic foundationalism as the standard of knowledge, argues against the pervasive idea of knowledge understood from a Baconian perspective as a so-called mirror of nature [see Rorty 1979].

Through the influence of the Vienna Circle positivists, in the first half of the twentieth century there was much interest in scientific realism. Scientific realism, which presupposes a basic distinction between the so-called folk view and the view of modern natural
science, suggests that only natural science describes or can describe the world as it is. Scientific realism quickly assumed a dominant role after Carnap, Reichenbach, Hempel and others came to the US. It just as quickly lost interest through the increasingly widespread disaffection with such related positivist doctrines as reductionism, physicalism, verificationalism, and so on. Few if any thinkers currently accept Vienna Circle positivism in its original form. Yet the strong realism on which it insisted is still widely accepted as the standard of empirical knowledge, despite the evident inability to formulate a convincing argument for knowledge of mind-independent reality.

The shift away from foundationalism in the mid-twentieth century did not diminish the interest in metaphysical realism. Kant was sensitive to and relies on the results of experience. He invokes the fact that no progress seems ever to have been made toward metaphysical realism to justify his Copernican revolution. Yet the same fact seems not to discourage the majority of philosophers who often seem incapable of learning from experience. Contemporary thinkers interested in metaphysical realism continue to strive to formulate a convincing argument for knowledge of the mind-independent real as it is.

In the contemporary debate, a number of thinkers still insist that to know must mean now as it meant to Parmenides to grasp the mind-independent real. Thus according to Boghossian, there is a way things are in independence of whatever we may think about them and we can in fact arrive at objective knowledge claims unrelated to social or cultural perspective [see Boghossian 2006: 131].

Boghossian rejects constructivism of any kind since claims to know must be objective, not subjective. Yet now as in Kant’s time, the difficulty remains the same. To avoid skepticism, we require a way of making objective claims to know. Yet if we admit we cannot intuit or represent reality as it is, then we need to find a way to make cognitive claims while abandoning any pretense of knowing reality as it is. This problem is not alleviated if we suppose there is a way that things are in independence of us and that knowledge requires us to know them as they are. The traditional approach, which lies in adopting metaphysical realism as our standard, fails in practice since no one has ever formulated a convincing argument to show that we can grasp the mind-independent real. I believe that the most promising alternative now as in Kant’s time is a constructivist approach that in turning away from metaphysical realism takes empirical realism as its cognitive standard.
About ten years ago, I wrote that «none of the current views of realism makes any progress towards justifying claims to know mind-independent reality as it is» [Rockmore 2004: 110]. Now, and after further consideration, I would like to strengthen my claim. Though the formulation of a foundationalist epistemic strategy has interested a great many talented thinkers, after several thousand years of effort, there has been no progress, none at all, in reaching metaphysical reality, and there is no likelihood, none whatever, that there will ever be any, either through epistemic foundationalism, still the main strategy, or in any other way. Yet, since philosophers do not seem to be able to learn from experience, there is every reason to believe they will continue to try to carry out the project formulated long ago by Parmenides, which has never seemed promising, and which is unlikely soon or indeed ever to bear fruit.

Bibliography


