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At the Frontiers of Reality

by Christophe Al-Saleh

Do the objects that surround us continue to exist when our backs are turned? This is what we spontaneously believe. But what is the origin of this belief that, according to Étienne Bimbenet, builds our humanity?

Reviewed : Étienne Bimbenet, *L'invention du réalisme*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2015, 317 p., 29 €.

Realism is, among other things, the belief in the existence of the world. As a realist, I believe that the world exists independently of me. When I stop looking at the apple, I do not believe that the apple has ceased to exist. And when I look at the apple, I consider that everything I see is as it should be because the apple enjoys those properties, those modes of being or appearing, independently of what I may believe or think. I also consider that other human beings have similar thoughts, and that they form thoughts about me. They can attribute to me beliefs, desires, and intentions, and I behave in the same way towards them.

Étienne Bimbenet takes for granted two theses he had developed in *L'animal que je ne suis plus* ("The animal I no longer am," Gallimard, 2011). The fist thesis is that human beings once were but no longer are animals. This means that the entry into humanity consists in exempting oneself from the evolutionary and behavioral laws that govern the animal kingdom. This does not mean that human beings are not, as are all living beings, subject to Darwinian laws; yet this legality is to be examined in relation to a more fundamental dimension of being human, namely worldhood, which is made possible by the mediation of language. Indeed, humans share a world for the reason that they live in language, and therein lies the fundamental dimension of human existence. In this sense, humans can contemplate their animal past from the perspective of their own specific world. Thus, as a human, I can speak of myself as "the animal I no longer am."

Second, Bimbenet attributes animals with phenomenalism. This is a consequence of the first thesis. Deprived of the world, or "lacking in world" as Heidegger put it, animals are governed by specific sensations in determined environments. They are idealistic in the sense that while they do have a world, this world is reduced to an environment determined by the play of impulses and needs. They lack the mediation of language that would allow them to refer to the world as being other and as standing independently of the circle of needs and impulses. This raises the question of how we became realistic. For we were once animals, before we invented the world. But how could we invent the world out of its deprivation?

In *L'animal que je ne suis plus*, Bimbenet raised this problem in the following terms:

> Realism is a problem and [...] appears as a genuine metaphysical *coup de force* - the *coup de force* of metaphysics (of the thing-in-itself) in the history of life. How can animality [...] open itself to what is not itself? How can realism emerge out of animal idealism (phenomenalism)? (p. 141, see also the conclusion of the book, pp. 404-409).

Realism as Transcendence of the Social World

The problem, then, is to determine the origin of a belief that presumably distinguishes us from animals, namely the belief in the existence of the world. To do this, the inquiry focuses on the attitude that must, according to Husserl's phenomenological method, be "put in brackets" so that the experiences of consciousness may be correctly described. This method states, for instance, that if I want to describe perceptual phenomena correctly, I must first look at how they appear to me. It is indeed more convenient to put aside the idea that what I see is an apple when seeking to describe phenomena, that is to say, the ways in which the apple appears to me. This is a method for directing attention which consists in unchecking, so to speak, the box "existence of the world" in the belief section.

The thesis defended in this book is as follows. The belief in the existence of the world is induced by adherence to the values of a group of human beings. This adherence is permitted by language. Learning to believe in the world means learning to use the referential function of words. However, to use words in such a way as to assign a reference to them, one must be sure to have enough *authority* to do so. Yet only the group can guarantee that authority to one of its members. For it is in a common and social world that words take on meaning (i.e., that they can have a reference). The group's authority over the individual manifests itself in the institution of language. I do not decide the meaning of words, let alone their reference. Thus, the individual is transcended in two ways. He or she is transcended by the world, the ideality of which he or she must recognize. He or she is transcended by the group.

> Reality in us proceeds from authority. (p. 253)

The authority of language lies in the fact that words have power. This is what is called the illocutionary dimension of language. One might, for instance, make a promise or give an order. Moreover, if we follow Searle and Kripke, the social world is constructed through adherence to a certain number of rules that merely perennialize the effectiveness of illocutionary acts. The reference comes after this. It is because an individual is supported by the social world and its authority that he or she has the authority to name the things of the world and to believe that he or she relates to a world which remains as it is. Realism is a "language game" (p. 239) or a "transcendental fiction" (p. 240). The mechanism of joint attention, discussed by the author in Chapter 9, provides sufficient evidence of this dimension whereby one learns the reference of words by being-with-another. Realism and essentialism (thinking that words designate essences beyond the things actually encountered) are "natural attitudes" in the sense that belonging to a human group suffices to develop them. In this regard, one does not learn to be a realist or an essentialist as one learns to be a Husserlian. This does not require any particular socialization. The fact remains that, according to the author, it would be wrong to think that natural attitudes are self-evident. The natural attitude "is nothing natural [...] in the sense that it is not a given: It derives all its power of imposition from human institutions and from their specific normativity" (p. 224).

The Social World and the Physical World

Bimbenet provides commentary on texts that, although not systematically cited at the end of the book, constitute an abundant bibliography. As could already be observed in *L'animal que je ne suis plus*, his reflections definitely originate in phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty) and social philosophy (Durkheim), but they are also enriched by his scholarly and subtle commentary on authors of the analytical tradition. One will appreciate the very fine use of John McDowell's *Mind and World*, as well as the relevant reference to Tyler Burge, an author rarely cited by French philosophers of non-analytical obedience.

The book is largely devoted to taking position in relation to other philosophies, such as naturalism, transcendental pragmatism, or Heideggerian philosophy. In this respect, it makes for a very rich and suggestive read. For instance, the resumption in chapter 10 of the rule-following debate, launched by Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein and introduced in France by Bouveresse with *La force de la règle* in 1987, is highly stimulating.

Bimbenet, it would seem, seeks to join the French philosophical tradition by distancing himself from philosophical options that have relevance far beyond the French context. Commentary is clearly the author's central method. However, the book's ambition is to consider realism as "an attitude or a form of life, not as a doctrine or a philosophical theory" (p. 47). And it is true that the author also draws on works in ethology and

developmental psychology to define realism as a natural attitude, showing both its absence in animals and its genesis in children.

Thus, according to Bimbenet, the belief in the social world precedes the belief in the physical world. In other words, one can believe in a world of objects—with their simple physical characteristics—only if one believes in the social world (which is how I translate, in terms of beliefs, the notions of authority and adherence to the power of the social). In other words, the belief in a world of objects depends *ontologically*, and not merely empirically or psychologically, on the belief in the social world.

Yet such a thesis has empirical consequences. One of these consequences is that it is impossible to understand the objects of the physical world without adhering to the social world, and, in particular, without being able to learn—in a socializing framework and according to intersubjective modalities—how to speak.

Cognitive sciences investigate, among other things, our abilities to interpret the behavior of others (folk psychology) and to understand the events of the physical world, notably by identifying causal links (folk physics). In a 1997 article entitled "Are Children with Autism Superior at Folk Physics?",[1] Simon Baron-Cohen recalls that while folk psychology develops around the end of the first year of child development, folk physics—i.e., the ability to project causal relationships onto objects and to anticipate the movements and reactions of things in the world—appears much earlier in the ontogenesis of the young child. In addition, children with pervasive developmental disorders perform better in folk physics than do other children, even though they are seriously deficient in the area of folk psychology, which results in non-specific language disorders (dyslexia, dysphasia, etc.).

What should we conclude if this observation is to remain compatible with one of the central theses of Bimbenet's book whereby the transcendence of the world in general, and hence of the physical world, presupposes the transcendence of the social world, or, to formulate it in the style of the book, whereby the world of things and objects stands out from the transcendent background of the social world? The following conclusions should be drawn.

First, the beliefs of children with pervasive developmental disorders about the physical world are proto-beliefs that differ from the beliefs of children without these disorders. There are two types of beliefs about the things of the physical world. On the one hand, there are realistic beliefs, guaranteed by an intact brain structure and adequate neurodevelopment (what is called a neuro-typical structure), and, on the other hand, unrealistic beliefs, particularly those specific to children with neurodevelopmental disorders such as pervasive developmental disorders.

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[1] In Wellman, H. and Inagaki, K. (eds), *The Emergence of Core Domains of Thought, New Directions for Child Development Series 75*, 1997, pp. 45-54.

Second, children with pervasive developmental disorders are able to anticipate events in the physical world perfectly, but without their attitude being the mere reflection of a realistic attitude. Their ability to identify causal links in the world differs from that of neuro-typical children.

Finally, the folk physics we develop, whether or not we have pervasive developmental disorders, has nothing to do with our belief in the existence of the physical world, since it is through social interaction and the learning of language that we learn to believe in it.

A Full Presence in the World

The problem with all these consequences is that they lead to an impasse. By linking all belief in the physical world to the belief in the social world, the author leaves us no choice but to reduce the folk physics of children with developmental disorders to a set of propensities to react to events, as can be observed in non-human organisms, including very rudimentary ones. But in this case, how can it be explained that in experiments such as those reported by Baron-Cohen in the article cited above, the folk physics skills of children with pervasive developmental disorders are determined on the basis of their ability to verbalize expected sequences of events, for instance, starting from narratives of movement of objects?

In addition, folk physics is rightly connected to language in children who otherwise have a great deal of difficulty using the same language to correctly answer questions on tests that measure folk psychology skills. This difference is difficult to explain when we assume, as the author does, that mastery of language—including when it comes to talking about physical objects—presupposes normal integration into the social world.

Thus, neuro-typical children and neuro-atypical children share the same folk physics, but children with pervasive developmental disorders deploy this skill earlier and better. Moreover, there is no reason to assume, particularly since their verbalization of physical events is not challenged, that their attitudes cannot be connected to a form of realism, even though their belief in the social world is not at all self-evident.

Yet for children with pervasive developmental disorders, theirs is a full-fledged presence in the world, even though it does not allow them to spontaneously adopt attitudes suitable for life in society. These children are able to engage fully in the physical world, to develop a fascination, for instance, with machines or with material structures. The presence in the world of the child with pervasive developmental disorders, however, remains the blind spot of the philosophy proposed by Bimbenet. This theoretical possibility is never contemplated.

Ultimately, the refusal to take seriously, for reasons that are never given, the specificity of the cognitive architecture of the mind and its connection with neural structures leads Bimbenet to exclude a whole section of humanity from this human world. These are the humans for whom the transcendence of the social world is not self-evident, but who are effectively present in the world.

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