In our everyday experience of predictions two kinds of results occur. At times, our predictions turn out to be correct and, at other times, they turn out to be incorrect. Traditionally, realist philosophers have focused upon the success stories to back up their claims. However, both the predictive successes and the failures play a vital role in giving us grounds for thinking that we do know what is happening in the world. Indeed, the failures are, if anything, more important.

I will put forward a short, simple argument for a pair of realist claims: metaphysical realism and what I will refer to as epistemological realism. The argument will rely upon nothing more than our apparent memories. Having presented the argument, I will go on to consider possible objections to it, of which there will be a number but none of which will do more than complicate the matter. The argument I present borrows from Peirce’s view that the world’s capacity to surprise us plays a vital role in guiding us toward truth, and from the argument to the best explanation. However, it combines the two views in a way I have not seen done previously.

I will begin by saying something about the realist claims I wish to defend.

I. Metaphysical and epistemological realism

Standardly, metaphysical realism is taken to consist in assent to a particular general ontological claim of the form:

MR) There exist objects, properties and relations whose existence is not dependent upon our beliefs about these objects and relations or the language we use to describe them.

This claim is quite minimal. It makes absolutely no claims about the kinds of objects that exist. It is also consistent with the possibility that we
might possess no true beliefs about these objects. To exclude that possibility it is necessary to add a further epistemological claim:

ER) Some of our beliefs about these objects are true.

This claim is also very minimal. It does not claim that we have knowledge as it does not claim that the beliefs are justified. Nor does it add up to either common-sense or scientific realism as it does not claim that either specific kind of belief is true (or justified, for that matter). As such, it could perhaps be called (by analogy) epistemological realism or something similar.

Why should I divide up the issues in this particular way? Part of the reason lies in my purpose being to help provide a basic epistemological foundation. The direct reason, however, lies in the nature of our apparent memories of the results of past predictions.

II. The basic argument

The naïve response of sensible first year students presented with sceptical arguments is to say, “But these doubts are obviously false as we have had so much predictive success in the past.” While the faults with this response are well recognized I think it is heading in the right direction as, indeed, such common-sense responses often do. The problem with the response is that it focusses upon only one aspect of our past predictions without taking account of the other, i.e. past predictive failures. However, these turn out to be even more important than the successes.

Predictive failure is a common-place occurrence. We fail to catch the ball as it drops faster than we had expected. We open the front door to find that our least favourite aunt has decided to pay us a surprise visit. The car stands mutely instead of starting as normal when we turn the key in the ignition. The chemical mixture swirls lazily about the beaker instead of oxidising in a rapid exothermic reaction. Things happen which we did not expect to happen and things which we did expect fail to occur. The world’s capacity to surprise us shows that there is more going on than what we know about. If our beliefs were all that there was to the world then the surprising and the inexplicable would not occur. But, if this is the case, then, at least prima facie, some sort of metaphysical realism appears to be true; it appears to be the case that not everything that happens simply depends upon our beliefs. Take the example of the faulty car. If only our beliefs determined whether the car started then it would seem that, given that we expected it to start, it should start. The nasty surprise of it remaining still
seems to suggest that there must be more to the car than simply our preconceptions.

It may be that a number of objections have already come to mind to this argument. If so please remember them as I will be dealing with a number of them in a short while. For the moment, however, it is necessary to consider predictive success.

The basic problem with the naive response to the sceptics being based upon predictive success is that this success was, by itself, explicable as the result of self-fulfilling beliefs. If the future position of a ball only depends upon our beliefs about that ball then there is no surprise in us catching that ball. However, this option is not available once we have taken into account predictive failure. Viewed in the light of predictive failure, predictive success takes on a greater significance. Even though not everything happens as we expect it to, we are very often able to predict accurately. This suggests that we do have true beliefs, true beliefs upon which we base our correct predictions. Therefore, it appears that the epistemological claim is also correct; we do have some true beliefs about the things that do not depend upon our beliefs.

This is the basic argument. Past predictive failure shows that there is more to the world than our beliefs. Past predictive success shows that, nonetheless, some of our beliefs must be correct. In this simple form the argument lends itself to a number of possible objections which it will now be necessary to consider. Each of them will take us into the ever stranger sci-fi territory of sceptical scenarios.

III. Objections

Perhaps the most basic objection attacks metaphysical realism and is that all of these memories of predictive failure could be explained by nothing more than the workings of our complex mind. Where we had mispredicted, this was simply due to our failure to fully realise something about our beliefs or due to us having contradictory beliefs. This is hardly an unlikely scenario as we are often met with cases where that is definitely true. Thus, we forget that it is our name day and that our aunt always visits us on our nameday. The resulting surprise at seeing her on our doorstep is due to nothing more than our forgetfulness. Forgetfulness is, in itself, not enough to explain the panoply of surprising and unpredictable events we are faced with. However, the distinction between conscious and unconscious beliefs helps to broaden the argument. Given the complexity of the perceived world the mind imagining it would have to be much greater than our own but this problem can also be side-stepped by the sceptic. The view
the sceptic can put forward to support the ‘it’s all in our heads’ argument is a solipsist version of Berkleyan idealism. Instead of there being separate perceiving spirits, each of us might be considered to be merely a part of God’s spirit, each part only dimly aware of the others. Thus, everything that happens is due to our own, i.e. God’s, beliefs. However, as only parts of the universal spirit, we are not conscious of most of these beliefs. Such a view is in line with Berkley’s own view that his idealism runs counter to metaphysical realism. Still, this argument pays too much heed to the nature of the universe and too little to our epistemic relation to it. The significance of metaphysical realism is that there are things to be discovered by us, that we are capable of error, that, essentially, we must be humble. A cosmos-scaled unconscious leaves plenty of scope for error in our conscious beliefs. To bear out this possibility requires only a minor change in metaphysical realism:

MR₂) There exist objects, properties and relations whose existence is not dependent upon our conscious beliefs about these objects and relations or the language we use to describe them.

The depths of our unconscious can be the subject of epistemic enquiry just as the depths of space. Berkley’s universe of ideas exists just as independently of our conscious beliefs as the universe of spatiotemporal objects. It is a very different universe, one that runs counter to common-sense or scientific realism but, as I had previously observed, metaphysical realism is a much weaker claim, one that is perfectly consistent which any number of bizarre ‘realities’, even the kind of solipsist ones necessary to explain the scope of what appears to us. To see it from an empiricist viewpoint, metaphysical realism is the claim that there are things to be discovered, things that we can be wrong about.

The second objection I will consider is one that Descartes considers in much the same circumstances. Our past predictive successes and failures could be due to the work of a powerful deceiver who feeds us with false information about the world. This would mean that instead of our predictions succeeding or failing due to being based upon true or false beliefs they failed or succeeded on the whim of the deceiver. As we should realise, given the previous argument’s failure, this argument does not question metaphysical realism—it assumes a reality which is not dependent upon our beliefs, the reality of the deceiver. However, the argument does cast doubt on the epistemic claim—we appear to only have beliefs about a phantasmagorical universe. Even so, the objection also fails to seriously affect the basic argument there.

Columbus died thinking that he had discovered a new way to reach India but, nonetheless, greatly increased our previously nonexistent
knowledge about the New World. If the deceiver were to exist our beliefs would be akin to those of Columbus. We would be wrong in thinking that they are about the familiar world of spatiotemporal events. Instead, they would turn out to be beliefs about what the deceiver wanted us to think the world was like. Once we realized this, for whatever reason, we would turn out to have had a great number of true beliefs we had misinterpreted. The problem is one that is not peculiar to Columbus and the deceiver but one that is an everyday occurrence in science and normal life. The scientists might have investigated a disease for many years based upon the assumption that it is due to a bacterial infection only to find out that it is the work of a virus. This does not negate all their work. Neither does such an error negate the efforts of a detective who, while on the trail of a serial murderer, discovers he is actually dealing with copy-cat killings. The issue at hand is not really an issue about the truth of our beliefs but about whether we should take up an internalist or an externalist theory of reference, as, indeed, Putnam’s paper on brains in a vat makes clear in a somewhat backhand way. Responding to the problem the way I do simply requires that one take up an externalist position.

A deceiving demon is not necessary to try and cast doubt upon the truth of our beliefs. A further objection that can be used is that, even if we accept that we have predicted correctly in the past, this might not be due to having true beliefs but simply due to epistemic luck. It is clear that even in cases where no knowledge is possessed it is possible to predict accurately; by sheer good luck one can happen upon the one combination of winning numbers that yields the jackpot. Heaping good fortune upon good fortune it is possible to imagine a scenario in which all of our previous accurate predictions were not accurate due to being based upon true beliefs but simply due to such massive good luck.

While this scenario is logically possible, thinking it relevant assumes that we need to show that metaphysical and epistemological realism follow necessarily from our predictive record. Such a strong link is not what needs to be shown, however, nor is it what I aim at showing. The aim is merely to show that the two basic realist claims are the most rational ones given the predictive record. As such, the massively improbable scenario of miraculously (and misleadingly) good epistemic fortune is not probable enough to cast reasonable doubt over the conclusion. It is enough to ask the question whether it is reasonable to believe that all true predictions that ever occurred were the result of good fortune to see that the scenario is simply too bizarre to carry the requisite argumentative weight.

I should admit at this point that allowing that the argument is only meant as a rational one rather than a logically valid one creates a very significant difficulty for me if I wish that argument to act as an epistemic
foundation. The difficulty is that I agree with what, since Kuhn’s work, has become the majority view that rationality is not a set of a priori rules but, rather, is a collection of a posteriori methods, a collection which is being constantly revised as new knowledge is obtained. Being dependent upon our current knowledge, rationality is an awkward standard to apply to what is supposed to be a foundational argument, any foundational argument. The answer to why it can be applied here depends upon understanding what kind of scepticism we can try to answer.

Scepticism can be thought of as coming in two different kinds—local and global. Local scepticism is a necessary part of thinking in that it helps us to locate those elements of our belief-systems which are dubious or incorrect. Also, in a philosophical context its value is often to make us realise that, since we can not turn aside the sceptical argument, we must not yet have a full understanding of the matter at hand. Thus, for example, local scepticism about the existence of belief statements of the kind proposed by the logical positivist helped us to recognise the theory-ladenness of language. Also, more dramatically, sceptics such as Martin Gardner make it their task to debunk various chanellers, faith healers, spoon benders and other claimants to paranormal powers.

Global scepticism is very different, however. When scepticism goes global and claims to undercut all of our endeavours it also undercuts the purpose of the more local scepticism. If global scepticism is correct then not only the spoon benders are quacks — all of us suffer from the self-induced delusion of the possession of powers we do not have, such as the ability to know what the world is like. If global scepticism is correct then… well, literally nothing follows. While we have to recognize that global scepticism might be correct — an argument which relies upon rationality can not avoid that possibility — this possibility doesn’t really affect what we do. Given that we exist we have no choice but to act on our best guess. We are akin to the traveler lost in a forest, thinking he knows which way is north and heading that way since there lies his best chance for help. As Hume recognized, global sceptical arguments have no power over what we do. In a sense, global scepticism always comes too late, since, if it is correct, then we already are in the predicament it diagnoses and out of which it offers no exit. So, in the case of rationality, the sceptical objection that our standards of rationality might be totally misleading is as undefeatable as it is ineffective.

It is possible to put forward another, much more direct objection to the epistemic claim. As it has often been pointed out to me when I make this argument, it is possible that our apparent memories are not just misconstrued but false. It is possible that we have come into existence only a few short seconds ago with all our memories in place. If this were so then
the apparent relationship between our memories and our beliefs would not exist. We could not be said to have predicted correctly thanks to true beliefs because both the beliefs and the memory of the predictions had come into being simultaneously.

The scenario put forward here is just as logically consistent as that of miraculous epistemic fortune. It is also, just as irrational to agree to. The problem is that if it is possible that the world was created a second ago it seems just as possible that it was created a minute or an hour or a century ago. Indeed, apart from the very recent creation there is an infinite number of times at which the world could have been brought into existence. And, given the predicted break-down of our ability to foretell future events soon after creation, none of these other scenarios suit the sceptic. However, unless the sceptic can give a good independent reason for why those scenarios can be discounted by him he ends up arguing for a scenario whose odds are practically one to infinity against—just as it turned out in the miraculous epistemic luck scenario. As such the scenario is not likely enough to worry us given the previously agreed to standard of reasonability.

IV. Conclusions

The argument I have put forward has a pleasing symmetry. Metaphysical realism is established by our apparent ability to make false predictions—by the world’s capacity to surprise us. Epistemic realism, on the other hand, can then be seen to flow from the fact that, even so, we are capable of making accurate predictions. As such, the basic argument I have put forward bases itself upon only our apparent memories of our varied predictive record but it offers to provide us with the most basic foundation upon which it will be possible to build a thoroughly realist stance. If, as the argument suggests, metaphysical and epistemological realism is accepted then a number of the most basic sceptical challenges are met and the way is open to asking what exact kinds of objects, event and relations one should be a realist about.

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