

# *Reality and Reason*

## **Preface to the Korean Edition**

The appearance of this Korean translation of *Reality and Reason* gives me the opportunity to clarify the purpose of the book and to indicate some of the areas in which my views have developed and altered in the years since it was first written.

My primary aim in the book is to explain and defend the realist and materialist view that there is an objective material world of which we can have knowledge. My argument, I have now come to realise, takes a Kantian 'transcendental' form. I do not prove these propositions from any more fundamental or indubitable premises, for there are none. Rather, starting from the assumptions that there is a material world and that knowledge of it is possible, I try to show how such knowledge is possible – what are its necessary conditions – and what this entails about the nature of subject and object, appearance and reality, and the relations between them. Althusser and Ruben adopt a similar approach, I now see, and I regret my polemic against them on this topic (pp. 9-14).

A great deal of traditional epistemology starts from the Cartesian assumption that we have immediate and indubitable knowledge of the contents of subjective consciousness, of appearances; whereas objective reality is something beyond and separate, and related to appearances only contingently. Once a dualistic gulf is created in this way between subject and object, knowledge of the objective world by the subject becomes inexplicable and impossible.

The possibility of such knowledge obliges us to reject dualism and assume instead the unity of subject and object, appearance and reality. Reality must not be regarded as a mere 'thing-in-itself' beyond or behind appearances, it is revealed in and through appearances. And appearances are not purely subjective: they are not *mere* appearances, but always and necessarily the appearances of some aspect of objective reality which is disclosed in and through them. All ideas, all forms of subjectivity, are necessarily the appearances of a reality which they reflect and reveal.

In the years that have elapsed since writing this book, criticism of the traditional Cartesian approach in epistemology has been widespread. The impact of Heidegger's work has been

particularly significant.<sup>1</sup> He maintains that 'Dasein' (human being) must be seen as 'Being-in-the-World', as a unitary phenomenon in which Dasein and World cannot be separated. Although Heidegger's focus is ontological rather than epistemological, many of his underlying assumptions are similar to mine and I have learnt much from his work.

However, there is one major apparent difference between Heidegger's views and those developed in this book. Partly as a result of retaining an epistemological approach, I defend realism in the form of the 'reflection theory'. All ideas, beliefs, and other states of consciousness, I maintain, are 'reflections' of reality. One of my reasons for doing this is to align myself with traditional realism, particularly in its Marxist form. However, my use of the term has been a major source of misunderstanding. Like Heidegger, many recent writers reject the epistemological attempt to start from subjectivity and explain how it can grasp objectivity. Likewise, they reject the language of 'reflection' as inescapably dualistic. For it seems to presuppose, at the outset, the separate existence of subject and object, reflection and object reflected, and thus to make the problem of knowledge insoluble.

On the other hand, as I argue in the book, knowledge of objective reality is not given directly and immediately in experience. Appearances may reflect reality in a distorted or illusory form; they need to be interpreted correctly before they yield knowledge. Moreover, the correct form of interpretation cannot be guaranteed a priori: there is always a possibility of error. The language of reflection is much happier when used to express these themes, which emphasise the differences between subjectivity and objectivity. These themes are also present in recent work in this area, though less clearly articulated. Both aspects, the unity and the difference, of subject and object need to be held in view in order to develop a satisfactory philosophy in this area, that is what I argue in the book.

I am now doubtful whether the language of 'reflection', with its dualistic overtones, is the best way to express this philosophy. Though I go out of my way throughout the book to repudiate these overtones, they are an intrinsic part of the Marxist epistemological tradition to which I am trying to relate my work. For this reason, if I was writing the book again now, I would attempt to avoid such heavy reliance on the terminology of 'reflection', or at least be clearer and more explicit about its problems and difficulties. However, the term is so central

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<sup>1</sup>M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Blackwell, Oxford, 1962.

to the way I express myself in the book that it cannot be removed by minor revisions and it must remain despite its problems.

I am grateful to colleagues and students for keeping me thinking about these issues.<sup>2</sup> I am particularly grateful to my friend and colleague Professor Sang-Heon Ahn for translating this work into Korean and making it available to a new and valued audience.

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<sup>2</sup>See S. Sayers, 'Knowledge as a Social Phenomenon', *Radical Philosophy* 52 (Summer 1989), pp. 34-7, and S. Sayers and T. Skillen, 'Truth and Relativity: An Exchange', *Radical Philosophy* 64 (Summer 1993), pp. 32-8.