

## The 2015 AwayDay at Pigotts (Bob Stone)

This was the fourth consecutive year that the event has taken place, which suggests it has been transformed from a nice one-off idea into a permanent reality (coincidentally the subject under discussion). Unquestionably real were the wonderful Buckinghamshire country house in which we talked, hosted by its owner Nick Wheeler Robinson, the continuous rain that greeted every walk to the facilities in the woods, and the magnificent lunch prepared by Gabrielle Townsend, Sue Brierley and Fauzia Rahman, which we ate in what reminded some of us of a boarding-school dining hall with its long wooden benches and tables. One useful visual aid was the house cat, which featured in Peter Gibson's talk about what happens to cats when they disappear behind sofas, but not, alas, in Mike Arnautov's discussion of Quantum Mechanics, where the living-dead status of Schrödinger's cat might have been once and for all settled. The five talks can all be read on this website, but here is a rough summary of the content.

The three main questions that permeated the talks, as well as the lively discussion after each, were:

1. Is there any reality out there?
2. If there is, can we know anything about it?
3. How does the world of our subjective experience fit into reality as a whole?

After a short introduction by the chairman, Fauzia Rahman, in which she advised us not to close our minds to any areas of reality at all, Jonathan Harlow kicked off with a historical survey of the three main British thinkers at the beginning of 'modern' philosophy, Locke, Berkeley and Hume, with a postscript on the often neglected Thomas Reid, the one who sometimes got out of his armchair to do some actual investigation of our sensory mechanisms. He highlighted the move away from a reliance on reason and religion towards empiricism, where the evidence of the senses is taken as the paramount source of our knowledge, with reason as its 'assistant'. But problems were also emerging in the relation between what we appear to perceive and what is actually 'out there': Locke felt he had to distinguish between aspects of the real world that are 'primary', appearing to us as they really are, and those appearances, like colour, which are 'secondary', not an intrinsic feature of reality at all. Berkeley is well known for denying any reality to anything at all beyond our perceptions; Hume agreed that reason cannot supply an argument for inferring reality from the perceptions, but rejected Berkeley's scepticism, believing that we naturally, by instinct, assume that there is reality producing our experiences – we have no choice. Their differences set the scene for the arguments in Kant and later thinkers, picked up by the other four talks.

Frank Brierley talked about the attempt, especially by Thomas Nagel, to answer question 3 above. He argued that there *is* a reality out there, which includes our consciousness and subjective experience (which is not 'reducible' to anything else), and, despite the huge problems, we *can* learn about that reality at higher and higher levels of objectivity. We have to use our subjective experience to do that, but we can handle that perfectly well: we can treat ourselves both as subjective experiencers and as the object of our own enquiries. This somewhat anti-Kantian stance served as the proposition in a debate, to which the opposer was Bob Clarke's speech later in the day.

Between the two, Peter Gibson stoutly defended the answer Yes to question 1. He called his brand of realism 'explanatory empiricism', the key feature being 'inference to best explanation', otherwise known as 'abduction'. Just as we use our imagination to form an explanation of the reappearance of the cat from behind the sofa a few seconds after it disappeared behind it, so we assume the existence of a reality 'out there' as the best explanation for the coherent experiences that we have – however weird that reality may be in the eyes of modern science. There may be a problem with finding a single true theory that

describes it, as Putnam apparently proved, but we still strive for better and better theories to explain the reality that is surely out there.

Then Bob Clarke played the sceptic, at least on question 2. He agreed with Kant that, while we may have cognition (*Erkenntnis*) of the way things appear to us, we do not have more than a limited knowledge of 'things in themselves'. He added four arguments to Kant's armoury: (a) Quantum Mechanics gives rise to at least two quite different, incompatible ontologies, which are experimentally indistinguishable, thus casting doubt on the objective truth of any such explanation. (b) Modern scientists cannot agree on what Time is, supporting Kant's notion that it is an artificial concept imposed on the appearances by us, not a 'real' thing at all. (c) Scientists nowadays do not even claim that their theories/models/paradigms are 'true', merely useful, testable perspectives, similar to our pre-scientific 'gut perspectives'. (d) Animals seem to have just enough understanding to get through life, and it is sensible to assume that we do too; understanding of 'things in themselves' is way beyond what evolution is likely to have given us.

Quantum Mechanics had reared its ugly head a few times in the first 4 talks, and so Mike Arnautov's defence of it was most welcome. He pointed out that the weirdness and counter-intuitive character of QM are not something unique or new: contradictions have existed in the past between theories that are not experimentally distinct, and even Newton's rigid deterministic universe has chaos theory at its heart. To the charge that there are different versions of QM, he replied that there is only one QM, though there are different interpretations of it with different ontological assumptions, which should be viewed as groping towards a successor theory. This was consistent with Bob Clarke's neo-Kantian view, summarised in Mike's slogan "Phenomenology under-determines ontology". Mike gave various examples of apparently weird ideas in QM, which seem so counter-intuitive that people might think they cannot be 'true'; so much the worse for our intuition, which needs to be educated, as indeed it has been in the past to cope with earlier theories that now seem familiar and obvious. So, to relate his remarks to the three questions, Quantum Mechanics is not the excuse for ditching either reality or our ability to understand it better and better.

There was, as you can imagine, a good deal of discussion of all these issues afterwards, both in the formal sessions and over coffee and lunch. It would be nice to say we came to some measure of agreement, but no – luckily in fact, or philosophy would come to an end. One thing that was agreed on by all was the success of the day, both intellectually and – thanks to Frank Brierley, helped by Fauzia Rahman – as a well-organized, lively and happy occasion.