

FULL-BLOODED CONCEPTUAL REALISM AS A RESPONSE TO SKEPTICAL RELATIVISM



MICAH PHILLIPS-GARY

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I discuss full-blooded Platonism (the claim that all possible mathematical objects exist) as a response to the skeptical problem in the philosophy of mathematics as to how empirical beings can cognize non-empirical mathematical objects. I then attempt to develop an analogous position regarding the applicability of concepts to reality in response to the skeptical problem regarding how we can cognize an objective reality through human-constructed concepts. If all concepts meeting certain minimal conditions structure reality under some aspect, then objective knowledge is possible, regardless of how these concepts arose historically.



I. INTRODUCTION

Realism in the philosophy of mathematics leads naturally to an epistemological problem of access. Namely, how do we, as empirical beings in an empirical world, obtain knowledge about non-empirical mathematical objects? As Paul Benacerraf points out, a belief state (ordinarily) only counts as a knowledge state if it is caused by its object. Because non-empirical mathematical objects are non-causal, this implies that mathematical knowledge is impossible given mathematical Platonism (the claim that mathematical truths are true descriptions of such non-empirical mathematical objects). Full-blooded Platonists try to avoid this skeptical conclusion by claiming that all possible mathematical objects exist. With mere knowledge of possibility not requiring such a causal link, we can attain mathematical knowledge without mathematical objects being able to cause our belief states.

Realism as a more general metaphysical position faces a seemingly dissimilar skeptical argument with, I believe, a similar solution. All of our cognition is conceptual, even basic sense-perception. When I see a cup, I do not merely experience a bundle of sensations, but my act of perception has a conceptual content which alone allows me to come to know something in this act. But, our concepts are not set in stone. Rather, they are a product of our cultural context and place in history. A nineteenth-century gentleman would not be able to cognize my laptop as a laptop. How, then, can we attain knowledge of an independently existing reality through such concepts? Plainly, this reality must, in some way, already be “structured” by these concepts independently of our activity if a correspondence between them and our beliefs is to be possible. But, to establish such a correspondence would seemingly require some privileged position independent of any conceptual framework. In the absence of this, to maintain the possibility of objective knowledge, we must posit a multi-aspectual reality such that any conceptual framework meeting certain minimal conditions can be regarded as structuring reality in one of its aspects. Such a position I call, by virtue of the analogy with full-blooded Platonism, full-blooded conceptual realism. I argue here that this position is necessary for us to conceptualize the possibility of our attaining objective knowledge as culturally-situated subjects, just as full-blooded Platonism is necessary for us to conceptualize the possibility of our attaining mathematical knowledge as spatiotemporally-situated subjects.

II. FULL-BLOODED PLATONISM AS A RESPONSE TO BENACERRAF

Benacerraf provides a popular way of formulating the problem of how it is that knowledge of mathematical objects is possible without a causal link.¹ As philosophers, we should pursue, as much as possible, the achievement of a unified theory of knowledge and meaning. Thus, to the extent that we understand certain things about the meaning and conditions for knowledge of empirical propositions, we should like to extend these truths to apply to mathematical propositions.² But, to interpret mathematical propositions analogously with empirical ones is to say that mathematical objects exist in some strong metaphysical sense.³ Because we cannot plausibly identify such existent mathematical objects with any objects in the empirical world, we must posit them as ideal objects existing non-spatiotemporally. In other words, we must be mathematical Platonists in a sufficiently broad sense. Yet, for my belief about an empirical object to count as knowledge, the existence of the object necessarily “must figure in a suitable way in a causal explanation of [my] belief.”⁴ If we, in accord with our desire for theoretical unity, extend this principle of empirical knowledge to mathematical knowledge, then, in accord with our earlier Platonism where mathematical objects are non-spatiotemporal and thus acausal, we must deny that mathematical knowledge is possible.

Mark Balaguer counters Benacerraf by offering a positive account of how mathematical knowledge is possible despite this lack of a causal link, which he calls full-blooded Platonism. This is the claim that “all the mathematical objects which possibly *could* exist actually *do* exist.”⁵ Full-blooded Platonism gets around the requirement of a causal link for knowledge, because the correspondence between our beliefs about mathematical objects and those objects themselves is accomplished simply by the fact that whatever claim we make or mathematical theory we suggest (so long as it is logically possible or consistent, i.e., not self-contradictory), there must exist some mathematical objects for which this claim or this theory would be true. If all possible mathematical objects exist, then for me to have knowledge of mathematical objects

1 While Benacerraf’s argument is typically taken as an argument against Platonism rather than as one for skepticism, strictly speaking, its conclusion is that Platonism is incompatible with the possibility of mathematical knowledge, which implies skepticism given Platonism.

2 Paul Benacerraf, “Mathematical Truth,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 19 (1973): 666-67, 10.2307/2025075.

3 Benacerraf, “Mathematical Truth,” 663.

4 Benacerraf, “Mathematical Truth,” 671.

5 Mark Balaguer, “A Platonist Epistemology,” *Synthese* 103, no. 3 (1995): 304, 10.1007/bf01089731.



it is sufficient for me to “dream up” an applicable mathematical object of some kind, so long as the existence of this object would not imply a contradiction.⁶

One worry about full-blooded Platonism is this: how can we know that our mathematical theories are consistent without access to the objects these theories are about? Balaguer responds to this critique by noting that our knowledge of the consistency of empirical claims does not depend on our having access to their objects.⁷ “I do not need access to the seventh child born in 1991 in order to know that the sentences asserting [them] to be female and Italian are consistent with each other.”⁸ Thus, under full-blooded Platonism, we can attain mathematical knowledge despite the lack of any metaphysical relation that would bring us into contact with them.

III. THE CULTURAL RELATIVITY OF CONCEPTS AS AN ARGUMENT FOR SKEPTICISM

Can a generalized version of full-blooded Platonism fill the role with regard to general skepticism that full-blooded Platonism does with regard to skepticism about mathematical knowledge? That is, not providing a refutation of skepticism, but rather making clear the conceptual possibility of a non-skeptical epistemological position on the basis of certain metaphysical claims. The particular kind of general skepticism I have in mind is one based on the cultural relativity of concepts. If all of our cognition is by way of concepts and all concepts are culturally relative, then how can we attain knowledge of an objective world? Why should we think that the world contains, independently of us, things corresponding to just these concepts with which we make our judgments? Friedrich Nietzsche seems to suggest an argument like this when he says, “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions—they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force.”⁹ All of our concepts are formed out of experience by way of a process of metaphor and abstraction.¹⁰ This process, obscured in the subsequent use of the concepts so formed, is both arbitrary and culturally contingent. Thus, judgments made with such concepts cannot claim to capture reality in its essential nature, only our own cognitive processes.

6 Balaguer, “Platonist Epistemology,” 304.

7 Balaguer, “Platonist Epistemology,” 320.

8 Balaguer, “Platonist Epistemology,” 320-21.

9 Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” in *Truth: Engagements Across Philosophical Traditions*, ed. José Medina and David Wood (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 17.

10 Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lies,” 16.

So, what does this general skepticism look like? This argument begins with the premise that all knowledge is conceptual, a relatively non-controversial claim. After all, we typically think of the immediate object of knowledge as a proposition. When I know something, what I know is a proposition, and only through this do I know an object. For example, I know of my red coffee cup (when my knowledge of it is propositional) by virtue of knowing that my coffee cup is red. Knowledge of this kind, propositional knowledge, is obviously conceptual insofar as a proposition is built up out of concepts.

We might, however, be inclined to think that perception amounts to an immediate kind of knowledge that is non-conceptual, which would thus allow us to escape from the cultural relativity of concepts. These underlying perceptions, then, would be non-conceptual and thus, at the most, biologically rather than culturally relative. Whether or not there exists such immediate sensations, Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology makes it clear that such a sensation could count neither as perception nor as knowledge. For a mental state to count as knowledge or as perception, it must refer to some object as what is known or perceived, i.e., it must be intentional.¹¹ For this intentionality of a mental state, sensation alone is insufficient.¹² Sensation must be afforded sense, or meaning, by an act of consciousness for it to refer and, thus, for it to count as knowledge or as perception.¹³ Although perhaps I could passively receive sensations of redness, for me to perceive something on the basis of these, e.g., my coffee cup, requires me to afford these sensations with conceptuality.

The second premise of this general skeptical argument is that all of our concepts are culturally relative. Thus, we can only know reality insofar as it is likewise something constituted by our individual cultural contexts and conceptual frameworks. Without giving a detailed argument for this position, I can give two examples of this relativity of concepts in order to motivate the conclusion with regard to concepts in general. When we try to think of concepts that are not culturally relative, two plausible suggestions are basic sensory concepts and the concepts of logic and mathematics. It is undoubtedly on this basis that the rationalists and empiricists, in their attempts to overcome cultural particularity, turned to mathematical reason and sensory experience, respectively.¹⁴ Yet, Ludwig Wittgenstein gives us reason to think even

11 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas I*, trans. Daniel Dahlstrom (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014), 169.

12 Husserl, *Ideas I*, 172.

13 Husserl, *Ideas I*, 173.

14 Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 178.



these concepts are culturally relative. For in a culture where everyone had a crushing fear of the number 13, they might conceivably skip 13 when counting and on the basis of this, a totally different system of mathematics than ours would arise.¹⁵ Likewise, we could imagine a culture where the colors were taught to children very differently than in ours, such that what we regard as simple or “primary” colors would be regarded as mixtures of other colors and vice-versa.¹⁶ Supposing that the case is similar with all our other concepts, the cultural relativity of all knowledge follows.

IV. SCIENCE AND ETHICS AS PRIVILEGED STANDPOINTS

While Wittgenstein denies that either mere sensation or pure reason can provide privileged positions from which to cognize an objective reality, we can find reasons to think that science and ethics can. Charles Sanders Peirce suggested the former, arguing that only in science is there “any distinction of a right and a wrong way” and therefore any possibility of knowledge or justification in a non-trivial sense.¹⁷ Emmanuel Levinas suggested the latter, arguing that culturally relative meaning is only possible “on the basis of the epiphany of a face,” i.e., the appearance of another person as one to whom I am responsible, which thus precedes culture and “enables one to judge it.”¹⁸ Without some method of intersubjective verification with reference to an independently existing object of knowledge, Peirce says, there is no sense of truth and falsity which is binding for all, or in other words, of “truth as something public.”¹⁹ Similarly, Levinas says that knowledge requires the possibility of critique and so it is only possible given the other person who puts into question my arbitrary freedom.²⁰ Else, we could draw no distinction between knowledge and opinion. Thus, by virtue of science having an independent object and of ethical responsibility being a precondition for all meaning or knowledge, they seem to escape the relativity of our culturally specific concepts.

While the idea that any objective knowledge must be in some sufficiently broad sense “scientific,” (i.e., have an independent object) the properties of which can be intersubjectively verified, and likewise

must be grounded in ethical responsibility, will be significant for the position sketched out below, neither of these philosophers’ views can stand alone as an adequate response to our general skeptical argument. For them to do so, either science or ethics would have to be able to provide a privileged conceptual framework in accordance with which all of objective reality could be described, along with norms to distinguish this unique “objective” reality from all the others, which would thereby be reduced to mere illusion. This is John McDowell’s point when he says that to conceive of scientific reasoning broadly enough that it is even plausible that it is not itself culturally relative is to conceive of it so broadly so as to be unable to determine by means of scientific reasoning the one true conceptual framework which captures the world as it really is.²¹

At most, then, science conceived this way can give us minimal conditions for knowledge of reality, not a privileged standpoint on reality. Something similar, I think, can be said about the claim that ethics gives us objective reality in some privileged sense. For even if my responsibility to the other person must precede the particularities of culture in order to establish language, the way in which this responsibility gets actualized in concrete acts seems to vary culturally. Therefore, this responsibility does not even give us a determinate set of ethical norms, much less a way of determining reality as a whole in opposition to illusory culturally particular pictures of reality.

V. FULL-BLOODED CONCEPTUAL REALISM

Thus, all of our knowledge is mediated by concepts, but these concepts are all culturally relative. So, the reality that we know through them must likewise be culturally relative and, in this sense, not an objective reality at all. In the absence of any possibility of non-conceptual knowledge, it seems that objective knowledge is only possible if objective reality correlates with some privileged set of concepts, such that knowledge claims made using this conceptual framework can map onto said framework. Yet, neither science nor ethics provide us with such a determinate conceptual framework that could uniquely “structure” reality in this way, insofar as to conceive of these in a way that is even plausibly non-relative is to conceive of them so abstractly so as to remove the specificity necessity for them to serve such a function. Objective knowledge, thus, seems to be an impossibility.

On the surface, this skeptical argument bears little resemblance to that which we can draw from Benacerraf. Both, however, are ultimately

15 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*, ed. Cora Diamond (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976), 83.

16 Wittgenstein, *Foundations of Mathematics*, 235.

17 Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935, 1958), 5.385.

18 Emmanuel Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 102; 100.

19 Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 5.384.

20 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2016), 85.

21 John McDowell, “Aesthetic Value, Objectivity, and the Fabric of the World,” in *Mind, Value, and Reality* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 126.



based on the lack of any basis on which to decide between possible alternatives. Without some means of access, we cannot rationally decide between possible mathematical theories. Without a privileged standpoint, we cannot rationally decide between possible conceptual frameworks under which reality can be described. But, if all possible (i.e., non-contradictory) mathematical theories correctly describe some universe of mathematical objects, then such a means of access is unnecessary for mathematical knowledge. Likewise, if all possible conceptual frameworks allow us to describe some aspect of objective reality, then a privileged standpoint from which to decide between them is unnecessary for objective knowledge.

This idea, which I call full-blooded conceptual realism, requires further clarification on two points in which it differs from full-blooded Platonism. First, for full-blooded Platonism, all possible mathematical theories describe some universe of existent mathematical objects. This is obviously untenable for non-mathematical propositions. It is unique to the kind of being that mathematical objects have that all possible mathematical objects exist.²² Instead, we must say that all possible conceptual frameworks can give rise to descriptions of objective reality. A conceptual framework is not itself a theory or set of claims that can be true or false, but rather an interconnected set of concepts on the basis of which we can make claims that can be true or false. To say that these claims are descriptions of objective reality is to say that their truth or falsity does not depend on the factual existence of any subject (except insofar as they are claims about factually existent subjects). Thus, to say that all possible conceptual frameworks can give rise to descriptions of objective reality is to say that even if no factual subject existed, objective reality would still conform to the ontological structures necessary for it to be describable using concepts. This would be the case regardless of what those concepts may be and regardless of the fact that those concepts considered as cultural products arise under specific historical conditions.

Further, conceptual frameworks cannot contradict because they are not sets of propositions, and so possibility cannot be identified with being non-contradictory, as is the case with mathematical theories.²³ Instead, when we say that all possible conceptual frameworks can give rise to descriptions of objective reality, what

we mean by possibility is the possibility of making claims using a conceptual framework that can be true or false in a non-trivial sense. As we saw in section IV, some conditions for this are given by Peirce and Levinas. Namely, a claim that can be true or false in a non-trivial sense must have to do with an independent object and also must be open to other persons who are able to subject the arbitrariness of my individual ego to critique, such that intersubjective verification is possible (at least in principle). That this is (at least in part) a function of the conceptual framework with which we are making claims can be seen by thinking of Immanuel Kant's *Ding an sich*²⁴ and Wittgenstein's beetle in a box.²⁵ A conceptual framework which consisted only of such concepts as that of an incognizable *Ding an sich* lacking all conceptual structure and that of an essentially private object would not allow us to make claims that could be intersubjectively verified, and so would not be a "possible" conceptual framework in the relevant sense here.

Finally, there is one significant critique of this view that needs to be addressed. Namely, it seems that we can, under different conceptual frameworks, truly describe the same reality in seemingly contradictory ways. For example, the same motion, say, of my arm, can be described as physically-caused or as voluntarily-performed. However, is this truly a contradiction? Certainly, it is a contradiction to call an action both voluntary and involuntary, because these concepts belong to the same framework which accords them the status of being contradictory.²⁶ Likewise, to call an action both physically caused and not caused would be contradictory (though admittedly this latter concept is only a limiting concept in the conceptual framework of the physical sciences). The concepts of being caused and being voluntary, however, belong to different conceptual frameworks. Thus, whether or not the ascription of both concepts to the same reality is contradictory depends on to what extent relevant concepts in the two frameworks can be correlated with each other. While there clearly must be some correlation between concepts in the conceptual frameworks at hand, such that the same reality can be identified under these two different frameworks, this

24 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 317.

25 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 106.

26 This is naturally an oversimplification. Nevertheless, I think it is clear that the same action cannot at the same time be voluntary in the way that my making a carefully thought-out decision is, and involuntary in the way that snoring in my sleep is.

22 Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations: Volume 2*, trans. J. N. Findlay (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001), 250.

23 Insofar as a conceptual framework gives rise to a set of tautologies, e.g., "A bachelor is an unmarried male," there is some sense in which a conceptual framework could be logically inconsistent, but the condition here is trivial.



is not enough to establish that these latter concepts are translatable into each other's contradictory opposites.²⁷ It is not even enough to establish that any direct "translation" is possible, except for perhaps in the case of certain fundamental concepts that allow for the same object to be recognized across multiple descriptions. Unless we can establish the possibility of such a translation, we are free to consider true descriptions made under different frameworks like other true descriptions with regard to unrelated properties of the same object. For example, a word's qualities of being a noun and being eleven letters long have nothing to do with each other, and a word's having a certain number of letters could never contradict its being a certain part of speech.

Further, in proposing an alleged correlation between concepts under different frameworks, the principle of charity applies. That is to say, all other things being equal, we ought to translate descriptions made under one framework to descriptions under another such that they end up true. Thus, that there be a correlation between conceptual frameworks making it possible for true descriptions made under one framework to contradict true descriptions made under another is, while not impossible, highly implausible.

Hence, the claim that we can find contradictory descriptions of reality made under different frameworks that are both true is suspect at best. To establish that this is the case would require overwhelming evidence to overcome the principle of charity, which tells us that in positing correlations between different frameworks, we should always tend towards mapping true descriptions under one framework to true descriptions under another. Seeming examples, like that of the same movement being both voluntary and physically caused, are thus highly problematic. The minimal correlation between frameworks necessary to identify the caused movement with the voluntary movement is insufficient to show that, e.g., the concept "voluntary" maps to "not caused."

VI. CONCLUSION

In the above, I have outlined the position I call full-blooded conceptual realism. Under this view, for any possible conceptual framework (any conceptual framework allowing for the possibility

of the intersubjective verification of judgments), there is an aspect of objective reality which these claims describe. Thus, objective knowledge is possible despite these conceptual frameworks arising from contingent historical conditions. This position is analogous to Balaguer's full-blooded Platonist position in the philosophy of mathematics, according to which all consistent mathematical theories truly describe some universe of mathematical objects.

Note that neither position provides a definitive refutation of skepticism. Rather, they serve to defuse skeptical arguments (Benacerraf's and Nietzsche's, respectively) by showing how the possibility of knowledge is still conceivable despite conditions that the skeptic claims are incompatible with this possibility. While I do think such a refutation can be produced, thereby showing that we possess objective knowledge, how we possess objective knowledge would nonetheless be inexplicable without our having clarified it in advance, as we have done here.

²⁷ This is not to say that there has to be a minimal correlation between any two frameworks for them both to be able to give rise to descriptions of reality, only that if the same object can be referred to using concepts belonging to different frameworks, then there must be a minimal correlation so as to make this object identifiable as "the same" across the different ways of referring to it (e.g., there need not be any correlation between the frameworks of mathematics and of psychology).





Micah Phillips-Gary is a senior math and philosophy major at the College of Wooster, with a minor in German studies. They are currently working on their senior thesis, in which they give an introduction to category theory and defend mathematical realism from a phenomenological point of view.

