On New Realism

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From Postmodernism to Realism

Realism, just like idealism, empiricism or skepticism is an ongoing theme in philosophy. *New realism*, on the other hand, is what we might call a recurring function, the reaction to a prior antirealist hegemony. This was the case in American New Realism of the last century[1], in Brazilian Novo Realismo from thirty five years ago[2] and it is the case in Italian Nuovo Realismo – which, as of today, is European[3] – inaugurated in the *Manifesto* that I published in the Italian daily newspaper "La Repubblica" on August 8, 2011[4], and arose in reaction to the findings of a certain postmodernism, according to which everything is constructed by our language and, more broadly, by our conceptual schemes.

It is no coincidence that this took place in Europe, where postmodernism was most influential. The "new realists" come from continental philosophy, where the weight of antirealism was a great deal larger than it was in analytic philosophy[5]. Both traditions held in common a premise: there is no "thing in

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[1] Holt et al., 1912.
[2] de Hollanda,1978.
[3] For an analysis of the debate, cf. Scarpa, 2013. Among the principal references are: Ferraris, 2012; Ferraris & De Caro, 2012; Ferraris, 2011, 69-93; Gabriel, 2013; Beuchot & Jerez, 2013.
[4] The text of this article, which is also offered in English, along with a complete review of the debate, can be found on the following site: http://nuovorealismo.wordpress.com
[5] In which, according to Graham Harman: "With some rare and ineffectual exceptions (...) no one in the continental tradition was declaring realism *devoid of ironic etymological tricks* prior to 2002." (Harman, 2013, 23) For a more detailed analysis of

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itself", but only phenomena mediated (or created) by our conceptual schemes and perceptual apparati, and it is in this sense that both traditions were interested in a "linguistic turning point". But the linguistic turning point was the result of a conceptual turning point, characterized by a predominance of the concept in the construction of experience[6] (and not in the *reconstruction* of experience, as would be reasonable to claim in a scientific or philosophical description).

However, while the problem for the analytics was an epistemological one ("to what extent do conceptual schemes and linguistic usages intervene in our vision of the world?"), for the continentals the problem was political. In keeping with what we might refer to as the *knowledge-power fallacy*[7], the idea was that reality was constructed by power with the aim of domination, and that knowledge was not a path to emancipation, but rather an instrument of power. I will baptize FouKant as the philosophical function at the heart of this approach, because, like Kant, it argues that we do not have direct access to knowledge and that the thinking self must necessarily accompany our representations, and, like Foucault (in the first phase of his thinking), it claims that the thinking self and conceptual schemes are ways of affirming the will of potentiality. Hence, in radical postmodernism a logical step is realized, where reality proves to be a construction of power, which makes it both detestable (if by "power" we mean the Power that dominates us) and malleable (if by "power" we mean: "in our power"), and postmodernism manifests itself as an emancipative instance of the construction of power.

Political events were what first contributed to revealing the limits of the emancipative hopes of the postmodernists. The advent of media populism served as an example of a parting with reality which was nowhere near emancipative, not to mention the unscrupulous use of truth as an ideological construction that unleashed a war based on false proof of the existence of weapons of mass destruction. In the media and in political programs we have seen the reigning of Nietzsche's principle, "there are no facts, only interpretations", which philosophers had proposed a few years earlier as the path to emancipation, and which ultimately ended up serving as the justification for saying and doing what one wished. In this way, the true meaning of Nietzsche's saying: "The reason of the strongest is always the

what I have displayed here from a historiographic perspective, cf. Ferraris, 2014c forthcoming.
[6] Cf. McDowell, 1994.
[7] Ferraris, 2012, 87 ss.

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best" was revealed. This circumstance explains the slight chronological confusion between the decline of antirealism both in the analytic[8] and continental world.

Both analytic and continental antirealism found a powerful theoretical justification in *constructivism*, that is, the position that represents the mainstream in modern philosophy[9], which states that our conceptual schemes and perceptual apparati have a constitutive role with respect to reality. This is a position that begins with Descartes and finds its culmination in Kant, only later to be radicalized in a nihilistic sense in Nietzsche, or specialized in an epistemological, hermeneutic and psychological sense. The underlying assumption of this function of thought which I propose be called DesKant is comprised of two assertions. The first is that we have a direct relation with our cogito and a mediated one with the world; the second is that the mediations produced by thought and by the senses ensure that all of reality be revealed in a mind-dependent way.

When the constructivists illustrate this second theory they seem to refer to certain indisputable evidence and highly recognizable actions. For example, Nietzsche asserts that our needs, our 'yes's and 'no's, are what dissipate facts into interpretations. But if the maximalist slogan that postulates the world's causal and conceptual dependency on thought is "there are no facts, only interpretations", the simple circumstance that a sentence such as "there are no cats, only interpretations" proves senseless makes the possibility of a strong dependency (causal: concepts cause objects; conceptual: our relations with any type of objects have a conceptual mediation) extremely dubious and constructivism falls back on a weak dependency, or *representational dependency*[10]: we are not creators of the universe, but we are constructors of it by using an amorphic *hyle*, cookie dough that is to be shaped through the cookie cutters of concepts[11]. Thus the separate existence of a world is admitted, a world which as such has no structural or morphological autonomy, at least not that we know of.

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[8] Which can be traced back to the early Sixties, with Kripke (Kripke,1972) and Putnam (Putnam, 1975, 215-271).

[9] Lachterman, 1989. For a criticism of contemporary findings, cf. Boghossian, 2006. I believe that constructivism, more so than the "correlationism" described by Meillassoux (Meillassoux, 2006) captures the central trait of modern philosophy, that it does not simply consist of thinking of the object in *correlation* with the subject, but of conceiving of it as the result of a construction of the subject.

[10] Rorty, 1998, 86.

[11] Putnam, 1988, 114.

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Ontology and Epistemology

This is where the first step taken by Nuovo Realismo comes in, which is that of conceptual clarification. If we attempt to give a concrete form to representational dependency, we realize that the technical term masks a conceptual confusion between ontology (that which there is, and which is independent from our representations) and epistemology (that which we believe we know, and which can be dependent on our representations without representations being what make assertions true, but rather that to which representations refer). We treat an entity – let us take, for example, the *Tyrannosaurus rex* (understood as a biological organism) – the same way we would a linguistic or zoological notion, and we can conclude that, since in the absence of humans there would be no name "*Tyrannosaurus rex*", then the *Tyrannosaurus rex* depends "representationally" on human beings. This is either a truism (if by "representationally" we mean something like "linguistically") or a perfect absurdity (if by "representationally" we mean something – even very little – more). Because this would mean that the being of the *Tyrannosaurus rex* depends on us, but then, seeing as though when there was the *Tyrannosaurus rex* there was no us, when there was the *Tyrannosaurus rex* there was no *Tyrannosaurus rex*[12].

The ontological hypothesis at the heart of the distinction between ontology and epistemology – suggested by the positive philosophy of Schelling[13] – is, therefore, that being is not something constructed by thought, but rather it comes into existence before thought begins. Not only because we have the testimony of endless eras in which there was the world but not man, but also because that which initially manifests itself as thought comes from outside of us: the words of our mother, myths and rules, totems and taboos which we stumble upon in everyday life just as in Mecca one stumbles upon a meteorite. To this end, Nuovo Realismo proposes its own distinctions, which can be outlined as follows[14].

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[12] As argues Marconi, 2012,113-137.
[13] Ferraris, 2013d.
[14] For an articulate description of this table, cf. Ferraris, 2012b.

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EPISTEMOLOGY	ONTOLOGY
Amendable	Unamendable
Science	**Experience**
Linguistic	not necessarily linguistic
Historical	not historical
Liberal	necessary
Infinite	finite
Teleological	not necessarily teleological
Truth	**Reality**
does not originate from experience, but is teleologically oriented towards it.	is not naturally oriented towards science
Internal World	**External World**
(=within conceptual schemes)	(=outside of conceptual schemes)

I will not delve straightaway into a detailed explanation, as this is the aim of the following pages. Instead, I will simply suggest the causes of what is, in my opinion, the fatal confusion between ontology and epistemology. This confusion can be attributed to DesKant, and was brought about by the need to revive, through construction, a world which no longer has stability, because it is assumed that nature as such is contingent. In order to do this, what I propose be called *transcendental fallacy*[15] must be carried out: if every instance of knowledge comes into being with experience, but the latter is structurally uncertain (as the empiricists suggest), then it is necessary to establish experience through science, by finding certain *a priori* structures that stabilize its aleatoriety. In order to obtain this result, a reversal of perspective must be carried out: we must begin with the subjects instead of the objects, and ask ourselves – with what is the matrix of all subsequent constructivisms – not what things are like in themselves, but how they must be made in order to be known by us, in accordance with the model of physicists who interrogate nature not as scholars, but as judges, that is, by availing themselves of schemes and theorems. DesKant adopts an *a priori* epistemology – mathematics – in order to found ontology: the possibility of *a priori* synthetic judgments allows an otherwise fluid and contingent reality to be fixed through knowledge that is certain. In this way, transcendental philosophy transfers

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[15] For a detailed analysis of trascendental fallacy cf. Ferraris, 2013.

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constructivism from the realm of mathematics to that of ontology[16]. The laws of physics are mathematics applied to reality and, in DesKant's hypothesis, they do not represent the excogitation of a group of scientists, but rather they are the way in which our minds and our senses work. At this point, our knowledge will no longer be threatened by the unreliability of the senses and by the uncertainty of induction, but the price paid will be that there is no longer any difference between the fact that an object X *is* and the fact that *we know* the object X. Hence the identification between ontology and epistemology, only partially preserved in Kant by the noumenon hypothesis, which the post-Kantians would later abandon without hesitation.

For perceptual experience (and not social experience, as we will soon find) to depend on the conceptual amounts to falling into what psychologists call "stimulus error", referring to the naturalness with which we are lead to substitute an observation with an explanation. It is the ease with which, when our eyes are closed, we answer "nothing" or "black" to the question "what do you see?", when in reality we are seeing phosphenes and shimmers, which we do not account for on a descriptive level, because what we are referring to is something different: a theory of vision according to which the eye is like a *camera obscura*, where when the diaphragm is closed there is absolute darkness. When we say that observers equipped with different theories see the reality in question[17] differently, a philosophical dignity is being conferred upon a psychological error, and more importantly a categorical error is committed which, in this particular case, entails confusing seeing with knowing. If, for example, I read the words "Reppresentational dependency" (sic) I *think* "Representational dependency", but I *see* "Reppresentational dependency" (sic).

Now, it is perfectly reasonable for there to be a conceptual action when we recognize a constellation, or when, while looking at three objects, we believe, like Leśniewski, that for every two objects there is another that is their sum, whereby the number of objects is multiplied. But this conflict can be clarified through the simple consideration that in reality we are seeing neither the constellations nor Leśniewski's objects, but only the stars and three objects of common sense. We are not trying to claim that the constellations are not real, but rather we are trying to trace a difference (which clearly descends from the difference between ontology and epistemology) between two layers that blend

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[16] Ferrarin, 1995, 131-174.
[17] Kuhn, 1962.

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together. The first is what I would call ε-*reality*, which is meant to refer to "epistemological reality", known in German as *Realität*. This is the reality tied to that which we believe we know in relation to that which is (this is why I call it "epistemological"), the reality which is referred to in sayings (which are substantially equivalent) such as "the thinking self must be able to accompany my representations" or "being is being the value of a bound variable". But alongside, or rather under, ε-reality, I would also add ω-*reality* (in the sense of ὄντως, I use the omega simply to make the distinction), ontological reality, which the Germans call *Wirklichkeit*, which refers to that which there is, independently of our knowing or not knowing it, which manifests itself as resistance and as positivity. ω-reality is the *external world*, an expression I use to designate the world that is external to conceptual schemes, as seen in the afore-illustrated scheme.

At this point, along with the difference between ontology and epistemology, we must introduce the difference between *ontological independency* and *epistemological dependency*. Because the way in which the problem of realism has been arranged in the analytic realm defines realism as the independency of *truth* from the knowledge we have of it. For Nuovo Realismo[18], on the other hand, it is the independency of *reality* from the knowledge we have of it (in certain classes of objects, things work differently). This aspect, in my opinion, is relevant because truth is an epistemological function, which relies upon minds: a sentence such as "on the 17th of September 1873 Bismarck was suffering from a cold" is causally independent from minds, but it relies upon minds. Thus, the formula for the independency of truth from minds (which we will return to) is appropriate for certain aspects of social reality. I would define realism, where reality is understood in the most general sense, in the following terms: realism is the opinion that natural objects (and eventually other types of objects that are specified from time to time) exist independently from the means we have of knowing them: they are existent or non-existent in virtue of a reality that exists independently from us[19].

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[18] Following a trajectory that from Aristotle's metaphysics, to Meinong's *Theory of Objects*, reaches the "object oriented philosophy": cf. Harman, 2005; Harman 2010; Bhaskar, 2008; Bryant, 2011; and, for an autonomous trajectory, Garcia, 2011.
[19] Following the definition of Dummett, who instead of "reality" spoke of "truth". (Dummett, 1978, 145-165).

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Unamendableness

The second move made by Nuovo Realismo, after conceptual clarification, is an empirical observation. There is a class of representations the thinking self will never be able to accompany, and it is that of the infinite things that have existed before any thinking self; I call this argument *pre-existence*: the world comes into being before any *cogito*.[20] Then there are the classes of representations which, so far as they are accompanied by the thinking self, appear to resist it, and are defiant of "representational dependency"; I call this argument *resistance*: reality can oppose rejections of our conceptual schemes.[21] Oftentimes the thinking self successfully interacts with beings that are ostensibly devoid of the thinking self, as, for example, with animals; I call this argument *interaction*: beings with different conceptual schemes can interact in the same world.

I would gather these empirical circumstances – which have a transcendental role, as they define our possibilities for knowledge, albeit *a posteriori* – under the title *Unamendableness*[22]: the fundamental characteristic of that which there is is the upper hand it has with respect to epistemology, because it does not allow itself to be corrected, and this is, after all, an infinitely more powerful necessity than any logical necessity. Unamendableness is a *non-conceptual content*[23], and it is precisely a contrastive principle, which manifests what is real as a non-self. In fact, it concerns the sphere of experience which takes place outside of the concept, and which defines an external world that is extraneous to knowledge. Non-conceptual content is a contrast (hence the resistance), something that cannot be nullified. At the same time, it can also become an autonomous organization of experience (interaction), which reduces the weight of the structuralization of the world attributed to conceptual schemes. It is in considering these circumstances that I have conferred a peculiar ontological valence to the salvaging of the value of aesthetics as a sensibility theory[24], not because it is, first and foremost, a source of knowledge, but, on the contrary, because it can occasionally be a hindrance with respect to conceptual schemes. From this circumstance follow at least three consequences.

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[20] Meillassoux, 2006.
[21] Ferraris, 2012c, 139-165.
[22] Ferraris, 2006b, 401-407; 2013b, 113-129.
[23] Evans, 1984.
[24] Cf. Ferraris, 2001b.

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The first concerns a *predominance of ontology on epistemology*. In its resistance, what is real is the extreme negative of knowing, because it is unexplainable and uncontrollable, but it is also the extreme positive of being, because it is what comes into being, what insists and resists interpretation, and together makes it true, by distinguishing it from imagination or from *wishful thinking*. We must not forget that in realms that are dependent on conceptual schemes, such as historical events, we are dealing with a clear manifestation of unamendableness, which is the irrevocability of past events upon which historians' interpretations are built. Now, interpretations depend upon facts and facts occur in a world of objects. If this is so, then the verification of matters of fact in the physical world (the fact that snow is white, for instance) is placed at a perfectly continuous level with respect to the verification of matters of fact in the historical and moral world.

Secondly: this in no way means that reality coincides with sensory experience, nor does it mean that unamendableness is limited to the perceptual. It simply means that unamendableness deconstructs the pretense of an ontologically constitutive action of conceptual schemes[25]. In the case of perception we have only one prominent realm, because at times we experience an *aesthetic antinomy* with respect to conceptual schemes. The underlying argument here in no way involves asserting that a stick submerged in water is truly bent because it appears to be bent, but rather pointing out that, despite our knowing that the stick submerged in water is not bent, we cannot help but see it as though it were bent[26].

Thirdly: a more general theory is drawn from aesthetic antinomy, which concerns the *ontological autonomy* of the world with respect to conceptual schemes and perceptual apparati. Reality has a structured nature that precedes conceptual schemes and is able to resist them. Therefore, there is no need to have recourse to an *a priori* epistemology in order to establish contingency. One of our most common experiences is that of interacting with beings endowed with conceptual schemes and perceptual apparati that are different from our own (or lacking any perceptual apparatus at all), such as dogs, cats, flies, viruses and plants. If interaction were to depend on conceptual schemes and on knowledge, it would be a miracle. If we would prefer not to resort to the hypothesis of a miracle or of pre-determined harmony, then we are forced to admit that interaction is made possible by the

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[25] Cf. Bozzi, 1990.
[26] Ferraris, 2001c, 126-134; 2013c.

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sharing of a common and homogeneous space, and of objects endowed with positivity that are independent from our conceptual schemes.

This is what I have illustrated elsewhere[27] under the title *the slipper experiment*, to demonstrate how interaction among beings endowed with profoundly different conceptual schemes, perceptual apparati and measures of life is a very common experience. Just as the ability of superorganisms, such as a termite mound, to form complex articulations in the total absence of a central regulatory system[28] is extensively studied by zoologists. That being said, I certainly have never believed that I, a dog or a constructivist see the world in the same way. I am simply saying that we are able to interact despite our different conceptual schemes and perceptual apparati.

Affordance

Hence the third step taken by Nuovo Realismo. Under these terms, what is real does not only manifest itself as resistance and as negativity. In every negation there is a determination and a possibility. The world employs an *affordance*[29] through objects and the environment, which qualifies as a *positive realism*[30]. The world of objects that surround us, including the other objects that are the subjects with which we interact, is robust, independent and persistent and does not simply say no, or oppose resistance as if to say, "here I am". It is also the highest ontological positivity, because resistance itself, opacity, and not being quick to make pacts with concepts and with thought are what ensures that the world of objects with which we deal is not a dream.

Infants at a pre-linguistic age are already able to segment reality in objects[31], which, strictly speaking, would not be possible for DesKant, seeing as though they presumably do not possess the schema of substance as permanence of something in time. The theory that I am defending through the

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[27] Ferraris, 2001, 90-91. The *Gedankenexperiment* can be found in English in Ferraris, 2002, 164-169.
[28] Hölldobler & Wilson, 2010.
[29] *Affordance* or *Aufforderung* is a notion that was extensively popular in the past century: cf. Gibson, 1979; Lewin, 1926, 294–329. Fichte already speaks of an "Aufforderungskaracter" of what is real. (Cf. Fichte, 1796, 342-351.)
[30] Ferraris, 2014.
[31] von Hoften & Spelke, 1985, 198-211.

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affordance argument[32] is that it is favorable to begin with *objects* (an area which includes subjects as well), in order to reduce the variance between our theories and our experience of the world. This is not due to a futile respect for objectivity (which is one of the properties of knowing, not being), but because of a dutiful recognition of a positivity upon which we all rely, but upon which we rarely reflect. This does not apply only to physical experiences: the way in which moral value or disvalue, or beauty, come forward is clearly something that comes out of us, surprises us, shocks us and whose worth lies first and foremost in the fact that it comes from outside, otherwise it would be imaginary. This is why, contrary to what is often said, value cannot be distinguished from fact: simply because a fact in and of itself is a value, the highest value – positivity[33] – which, in turn, is the condition of possibility of every value.

This can be better understood through the *ethical brain experiment*. It works as follows: imagine (as in Putnam's *Gedankenexperiment*) that a mad scientist keeps several brains in a jar and nourishes them artificially. Through electrical stimulation, the brains are made to believe that they live in a real world, when in actuality what they feel is the effect of simple electrical stimulations. Now imagine that certain situations are depicted in those stimulations, which require moral positions to be assumed: planning genocide or sacrificing oneself for freedom, committing embezzlement and performing holy acts. Can we truly claim that certain moral acts take place within these circumstances? In my judgment, we cannot. At best, there can be representations endowed with moral content. Without the positivity of objects there is no possible morality.

Everything, then, including corporations, symbolist poems and categorical imperatives, originates in the affordance offered by the *environment*. A cavern affords different types of beings, and serves as a refuge precisely because it has certain characteristics and not others. Ecosystems, state organizations, interpersonal relations: in each of these structures, which are infinitely more articulate than a cavern, the structure of resistance and affordance is repeated. I would define an environment as any sphere in which these interactions take place, from the ecological niche to the social world; naturally, each with its own characteristics. In the environment, meaning "comes into being" – it is not at our complete disposition. Meaning is a modality of

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[32] Which I articulated extensively in the first part of my *Documentality* (Ferraris, 2012b).
[33] Cf. Rickert, 1915.

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organization, where something is presented in some way. Yet, it does not ultimately depend on subjects. In other words, it is a relationship of "resistance": "*to exist is to resist in an environment*". The suggested perspective is that of a structurally opaque existence that manifests itself first and foremost in its persevering in an environment, without further qualifications. Put otherwise, the field of meaning is in the environment, not in one's head, and in affordance, not in concepts. Obviously, interpreting objects and the opacity of being requires the awareness that there can never be a full totality, and that our relationship with the world is a nebulous equilibrium between ontology and epistemology[34]. This, however, in no way means that the positivity of objects is beyond us. It is, in fact, that very positivity that allows us to be in the world despite the fact that we rarely have clear and distinct notions.

The *emergence* of the being's thought occurs in the environment, and is a process that can be understood as the development of (intelligent) epistemology on the basis of a non-intelligent ontology, a competency that precedes comprehension[35]. While the constructivist theory is that a disincarnate thought constitutes that which is real, what we are dealing with here is a clear reversal: thought arises in the realm of what is real and is a highly specialized product of evolution, and it is this very circumstance that explains why epistemology can successfully refer to ontology, as demonstrated by the history of science. Hence not only the theory of dependency (which we have already considered) but that of epistemology's *derivation* from ontology. All of the essential differences that support our thought, and that tend to be forgotten in the process of thinking, though they are guidelines in the sphere of practice, derive from that which is real, and not from thought: the difference between ontology and epistemology, just as between experience and science, external world and internal world, objects and events, reality and fiction. Provided that metaphysical realism (assuming that a position has ever actually existed in the terms in which the antirealists represent it) supposes a full mirroring of two distinct entities, thought and reality:

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[34] As Tim Button suggests, we must situate ourselves between external realism (ontology) and internal realism (epistemology), but we do not know precisely at what point. If we did know, I believe we would be dealing with absolute knowledge. (Cf. Button, 2013.)

[35] Cf. Dennett, 2009, 10061-10065.

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(1) Thought ←→Reality

Provided that, in finding the relationship between two distinct entities unexplainable, constructivism instead suggests a constitutive role of thought with respect to reality:

(2) Thought → Reality

Positive realism finds an emergent fact in thought with respect to reality, exactly like the laws of gravity, photosynthesis and digestion.

(3) Thought ← Reality

At this point it is possible to organize the characteristics of the environment, by introducing, together with the categories of *natural objects*, which exist in space and time independently from subjects, and *ideal objects*, which exist outside of space and time, independently from subjects, *artefacts*, which exist in space and time dependently on subjects because of their genesis and that of *social objects*, which exist in space and time dependently on subjects because of their genesis and their perseverance[36]. From this point of view, it is entirely legitimate to assert that the stock market or a democracy have a representational dependency (I will soon attempt to clarify this expression which, as we have seen, is obscure as such) with respect to our collective beliefs. However, this by no means implies that dinosaurs have a certain dependency with respect to our collective beliefs. Their dependency relates to paleontology departments. Yet, paleontology departments do not make dinosaurs exist, while statements from rating agencies do make the bid-ask spread increase or decrease. In this sense, through a form of *contextualism*, I would affirm that we are never realists about everything, nor are we antirealists about everything. There are spheres of being, which are more or less akin to the focal meaning of existence as resistance in an environment.

These spheres are reconstructed as *things in themselves* and not as phenomena. Let us take natural objects. For DesKant these are phenomena par excellence: they are situated in space and time, which are not found in nature. They are in our head, along with the categories we use to give order

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[36] Cf. Ferraris, 2012b; 2005, 135-178.

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to the world. In fact, if there were no human beings, there could be no space or even time. This leads us to conclude that before man there were no objects, at least not as we know them, but clearly, as we have seen, this is not so. Yet, upon closer inspection it becomes clear that social objects, which depend on subjects (though they are not subjective) are also things in themselves, and not phenomena. This may seem complicated at first, because if social objects were to depend on conceptual schemes, then it would seem obvious that they were phenomena. But this is not so. It is not enough to depend on conceptual schemes in order to be a phenomenon. A phenomenon must act against certain things in themselves. Let us take the example of a fine. What would its 'in itself' be? To say that a fine is an apparent fine simply amounts to saying that it is not a fine. From DesKant's point of view, things in themselves are, first and foremost, people who turn into ghosts, or umbratile projections of thought. Next, we might consider events, things such as hurricanes or automobile accidents. These are often unpredictable. Irregularity, that which disregards our data and expectations, is the clearest demonstration of the fact that the world is much more vast and unpredictable than our thought.

Documentality

I would now like to focus on the fourth step taken by Nuovo Realismo, which concerns the realism of social objects. A mind-dependency theory has intrinsically obscure aspects as it does not entail a simple causal dependency. In order for there to be social objects, it is necessary for there to be at least two minds, and, in complex phenomena, there are normally many more. Of them, many do not think of the object in any way, and yet, they interfere with the process, just as many others do think of the object but are unable to successfully interfere (such as a financial crisis, or a war). It would seem as though we are dealing with a puzzle: as we have seen, social objects are *dependent on the mind*, but are *independent from knowledge* (and, therefore, also from the conscience). A wedding people no longer think about still took place. Accordingly, there can be a recession, even if no one suspects its existence. How is this possible? Might this amount to claiming that social objects are simultaneously dependent on and independent from the mind? The answer is no. The contradiction would subsist if the "mind dependency" were understood as dependency on *one* mind, as if anyone could determine

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the course of the social world. But this hypothesis is proven wrong by any experience of the social world (my mind does not make laws, nor prices, but at best it is writing this essay), as well as by the fact that in many circumstances our own mind seems to be dependent on itself, such as when we develop obsessive thoughts we wish we didn't have.

While there is no longer a contradiction between "mind dependency" and "knowledge independency", we must still explain in what way social objects can be in force even when we are not conscious of them or do not have knowledge of them. This is what I have set out to clarify through the hypothesis that the foundation of the social environment is *documentality*[37] (the whole of documents and records[38], not individual and collective intentions). In reality, with social objects we are not dealing with a series of intentionalities which consciously keep an object alive, as if we were all simultaneously thinking of its constitution. No: the constitution is written, and at this point it is in force even when no one thinks of it any longer (which actually happens all too often). Therefore, from the perspective of documentality, the constitutive law of social objects is *object = inscribed act*. In other words, a social object is the result of a social act (involving at least two people, or a machine delegate and a person) which is characterized by being recorded on a piece of paper, a computer file or even simply in the heads of the people implicated in the act. Once it is recorded, the social object, which is dependent on minds as much as it is on its genesis, becomes independent in terms of its existence, just as with artefacts, the sole and extremely important difference being that an artefact can offer its own affordance even in the absence of minds (a table can be a shelter for an animal), while a document cannot. In my judgment, the notion that meaning is not in one's head, but in the world[39], is a principle that is successfully illustrated by the very relationship between affordance and documentality.

In addition to resolving the puzzle of mind-dependency and conscience-independency, documentality allows us to provide a more solid foundation for the constitutive rule proposed by the most influential theorist of social objects, John Searle: that is, the rule that *X counts as Y in C* (the physical object *X* counts as the social object *Y* in a context *C*). The limit of this proposal is twofold. On one hand, it appears to be incapable of accounting for complex

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[37] In addition to the aforecited *Documentality*, see Ferraris, 2007, 385-401; 2009, 286-314; 2010, 133-148.
[38] Ferraris, 2008, 110-123.
[39] Cf. Putnam, 1988, 227.

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social objects, such as enterprises, or negative entities, such as debts, where it seems to be difficult to find a physical object that is predisposed to transforming into a social object. On the other hand, it makes all of social reality depend on the action of an entirely mysterious entity (as opposed to documents), or collective intentionality, which takes the responsibility of the transformation of the physical into the social. Conversely, according to the version I am proposing, it is very easy to account for the totality of social objects, from informal promises made by word of mouth or the corporate construction of enterprises, to negative entities such as debts. In all of these cases we find a minimal structure, guaranteed by the presence of at least two people, who perform an act (which can include a gesture, a word or writing) with the possibility of being recorded on some sort of support, even if only the human mind. In addition to accounting for the physical basis of the social object, which is not an *X* that is available for the action of collective intentionality, but a recording which can take place on various supports, the rule I am proposing (which I call the "*documentality rule*" in contrast with the "intentionality rule") has the advantage of not making social reality depend on a function, that of collective intentionality, which is dangerously similar to a purely mental process, which suggested to Searle an assertion that is far from realistic, that is, that an economic crisis is, largely, a product of the imagination[40]. As a form of documentality, money is anything but imaginary, and it is precisely this circumstance which allows us to draw a distinction between the social (that which records the acts of at least two people, even if the recording were to occur in people's heads and not on external documents) and the mental (that which can occur even simply in the head of an individual).

I would like to share a penultimate thought on *hermeneutics*[41], which postmodernism has almost singularly claimed a monopoly on. In this context, I in no way intend to assert that there are no interpretations in the social world. Nonetheless, the first and most fundamental interpretation consists of discerning between that which can be interpreted and that which cannot be interpreted, the nexuses that exist between ontology and epistemology and the relevance these have in relation to natural, social and ideal objects. In the

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[40] «It is [...] a mistake to treat money and other such instruments as if they were natural phenomena like the phenomena studied in physics, chemistry and biology. The recent economic crisis makes it clear that they are *products of massive fantasy*», Searle, 2009, p. xxxiii.

[41] For more on this topic cf. Ferraris, 2012d, 67-83.

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social world epistemology undoubtedly counts a great deal because it is constitutive, compared to ontology (where in the natural world it is only reconstructive: it finds something that exists independently from epistemology): what we think, what we say – our interactions – are decisive, and it is decisive that these interactions be recorded and documented. As a consequence, the social world is full of documents, in archives, in our drawers, in our wallets, and now even in our phones[42]. Within this framework, it is possible to make sense of both constructivist and realist intuition:

1. Natural objects are independent from epistemology and they validate the natural sciences.

2. Ontology is independent from epistemology.

3. Social objects are dependent on epistemology, without being subjective because of it.

4. "Intuitions without concepts are blind" holds true first and foremost for social objects (where it has constitutive value), and subordinately for the epistemological approach to the natural world (where it has reconstructive value).[43]

5. Realist intuition and constructivist intuition, therefore, have equal legitimacy, in their respective realms.

My conclusive theory is that *intentionality derives from documentality*. The postmodernists greatly insisted that the subject not be considered a fundamental element, but their position did not generally reach beyond the criticism of a chosen target, the "Cartesian subject", and the mere hypothesis that the subject is conditioned by culture. In my judgment, the perspective of documentality allows for a positive development, which is launched from a theory that – from the Ancients to the Moderns – conceives of the mind as a slate, upon which inscriptions are made. As a matter of fact, as we have seen, inscriptions have a powerful activity in social reality: social behaviors are determined by laws, rites and norms, and social structures and education form our intentions. Let us imagine that an archetypal Robinson Crusoe were the first and last man on the face of the earth. Could he truly be tormented by his ambition to become a rear admiral, a multimillionaire or a court poet? Certainly not. Just as he could not sensibly aspire to follow fashion, or to collect figurines of soccer players or still lifes. And if, theoretically, he were to attempt to forge a document, he would be taking on an impossible feat,

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[42] Ferraris, 2014b. Cf. also Ferraris, 2006, 41-52.
[43] Ferraris, 2011b, 229-237.

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because in order to make a document, there must be at least two people: one who writes it and one who reads it. In reality, our Robinson Crusoe wouldn't even have a language, and we could hardly say that he "thinks" in the common sense of the term. And it would be difficult to maintain that he is proud, arrogant or in love for more or less the same reason it would be absurd to claim that he has friends or enemies. And thus we have two circumstances that reveal the social structure of the mind. On the one hand, the mind cannot arise if it is not immersed in a social bath, made of education, language, and the transmission and recording of behaviors. On the other hand, there is the vast category of social objects. Rather than designing a world which is at the complete disposition of the subject, the sphere of social objects reveals the inconsistency of solipsism: namely, that the fact that there are others in the world, in addition to us, is proven by the very existence of these objects, which would have no reason to exist in a world with only one subject. If it were not possible to keep track there would be no mind, and it is no coincidence that the mind is traditionally represented as a *tabula rasa*, a support upon which impressions and thoughts are inscribed. But without the possibility of inscriptions there would also be no social objects, which consist of recording social acts, beginning with the fundamental act of the promise. If this is so, it would be opportune to translate a phrase by Aristotle, which states that man is a *zoon logon echon*: man is an animal endowed with inscriptions, or rather (seeing as one of the meanings of "logos" in Greek is "promise", or "given word"), "man is an animal who promises".[44]

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[44] «To breed an animal with the prerogative to *promise* – is that not precisely the paradoxical task which naure has set herself with regard to humankind?», Nietzsche, 1994 [1887], 35.

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