

2007 Istituto di Filosofia Arturo Massolo  
Università di Urbino  
Isonomia



## In defence of a minimal idealism

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### Abstract

In the last years, the panorama of analytical philosophy has been characterized by a strong revival of metaphysical realism, combined with a more general attack to idealism. In this paper I will try to show – at least in the form of some prolegomena – how we can commit ourselves to a minimal form of transcendental idealism, without being afraid of losing the world. The strategy is to consider reality as depending on possible experience, and to admit the plausibility of an ontological pluralism, taking the world as a noumenic transcendental idea.

### 1. Who's afraid of idealism?

The revival of realism that we have seen in these last years seems to be determined by a common fear –the fear of *idealism*. Under this concept, a lot of different things are often mixed together: Kantian transcendentalism, antirealism, anthropological relativism, and so on.

Barry Smith is one of the most distinguished defenders of a strong metaphysical realism. If we have a look at his recent paper *Beyond Concepts: Ontology as Reality Representation*, we can read that idealism is considered as:

- a) a view according to which there is no such thing as objective reality to which the concepts or general terms in our knowledge representation system would correspond;
- b) a view according to which we cannot know what objective reality is like, so that there is no practical benefit to be gained from the attempt to establish such a correspondence;

c) a view according to which the term 'reality' in any case signifies nothing more than a construction built out of concepts, so that every concept-system would in principle have an equal claim to constituting its own 'reality' or 'possible world'.<sup>1</sup>

This is already a quite astonishing misunderstanding. Smith, however, considers astonishing the *very fact* that many thoughtful members of the knowledge representation and related communities, including many of those involved in the development of ontologies, have embraced one or other form of idealist, skeptical or constructionist philosophy<sup>2</sup>. Also, he considers this kind of idealism like a form of postmodernism or cultural relativism, whose thesis would be that «the theories of objective reality developed by the natural sciences are nothing more than cultural constructs, comparable to astrology or witchcraft»<sup>3</sup>.

The real problem is that Smith generalizes. He considers only some principles of a very vague idealism, and stretches them in their most extreme way: loss of objective reality, equality of every concept-system, scepticism, even postmodernism<sup>4</sup>.

Why all this acrimony? I think because he is literally *afraid* of all this<sup>5</sup>.

Smith's words are of course just an example. But they make clear the feeling which I was talking about: any kind of idealism smells *fishy*. So the goal of my paper is to make clear that we can consider it in a much more minimal way, very close to Kant's transcendental one, and to erase all the distrusts and fears that realists have about it.

I will put the big issue, for commodity, into the local debate between realism and antirealism. From now I am going to speak of my idealism as a form of antirealism: the aim of my paper will be to clarify *how much* idealism we really need to prevent us from an epistemological (and ontological) collapse<sup>6</sup>.

Before defining the minimal idealism (or antirealism) that I hold, I would like to make it explicit. I think that the realist's fear concerns primarily the *losing of the world*, or –better– the losing of the world as a *judge of our believes*. If we say that the world is (even partially) shaped by our concepts, as the transcendental idealist says, it seems clear that we put a dependence of it on them –dependence that can lead, for the realist, to a lack of honesty in justify our theories or in composing an ontology.

Then, the fear slowly increases in thinking that the antirealist speaks just of his mental representations, or of his concepts –and not of reality itself<sup>7</sup>. That would lead,

finally, to a catastrophic relativism, once seen the variety of conceptual schemes. In a slogan-phrase: we have *lost the world*.

This can be matter of happiness for a sheer relativist<sup>8</sup>, but in the opinion of the most it would be a self-killer conclusion –not only for our knowledge, but also for our common life. What I would like to show is that we can avoid this conclusion even standing into a (very) moderate idealistic position. The strategy consists in getting back some Kantian ideas –basically, the core of transcendentalism– but without taking them too naively<sup>9</sup>.

## 2. Metaphysical realism

Following Putnam (1990), we can define metaphysical realism as a position holding that:

- reality exists as a defined totality of objects and properties;
- the theory of truth must be defined in terms of correspondence between a symbolic system (a language) and the objects of reality (*adaequatio intellectus et rei*);
- it exists only *one* true and consistent description of the world –namely, the one which satisfy this correspondence relation<sup>10</sup>.

Of course there can be some small variations between one version and the other. In its sharpest forms, this realism denies also the existence of any a priori truth<sup>11</sup>. Barry Smith, on the contrary, defends a material apriorism *à la* Reinach<sup>12</sup>. There can also be scientific realisms, which consider the contemporary physics as the best pictures of the world, and positions that doesn't commit to that, preferring a more descriptive kind of ontology.

But, anyway, the core idea of metaphysical realism rests in the thesis that *reality exists independently of the mental*<sup>13</sup>. And as idealism is commonly considered as the theory that puts reality in a relation of dependence from our mental life, it is clearly regarded as the greatest enemy. Realism, proving an undoubted sense of honesty, sees

reality as something that we cannot dominate in its largest part. Something that we can represent, know, partly modify, but that in no case is *built up* by our concepts.

An old philosophical puzzle illustrates this very well. A tree falls into a desert forest. Does it produce any noise, even if nobody hears it? For the realist, the answer is yes, of course. Reality stands there like it is: it does not matter if there is an observer or not. An idealist, in realist's view, is committed to say that the tree does not make any sound. Which is foolish.

Smith enlarges the example to material a priori laws: the law of transitivity «would of course hold also in a world without thinking ('forming', 'constituting') subjects»<sup>14</sup>. The conclusion is the same: the world exists independently from us, with its own laws and its own set of objects and characteristics. We can describe it in different ways, but it remains the same under all these representations.

### 3. Realist's idealism

Now, we have said that for the realist, the world exists independently of the mental. It is evident that this formulation contains at least two unclear terms: *independently*, and *mental*.

For the sheerest idealism we can imagine, reality is not just contaminated by our concepts, but even *created* by the Self<sup>15</sup>. Another kind of idealism is Solipsism, according to which the world is not created by the subject, but it is only in relation to *one subject* –say, me<sup>16</sup>.

I guess that for many realists, idealism is simply *this*, without any other possible nuance. Something that leads to an untenable subjectivism –the lack of contact with an objective reality, in Smith's words quoted above. We cannot know reality as it really is: what do we know, then? Where can we ground our knowledge, how can we distinguish between good or bad metaphysics, if there is nothing which is independent from our schemes?

In short, we would like to have something that prevents us from attributing a concept to reality, when its exemplification actually does not exist. To put it with Austin, we

want to know that witches do not make part of the world: but if the world is made up by our concepts, this seems quite hard to obtain.

In this spirit, Donald Davidson could write that

Antirealism is a manifestation of the irrepressible urge in Western philosophy to ensure that whatever is real can be known. Antirealism attempts to achieve this reading out of existence whatever it decrees lies beyond the scope of human knowledge.<sup>17</sup>

This is nothing but the fear again. Let us summarise what the realist can think about the idealist's and antirealist's position:

- 1) It leads to reduce reality to what is known, or what can be known.
- 2) It leads to relativism, or even to scepticism, because every conceptual scheme seems to be equal, without an independent reality.
- 3) It leads to a misleading ontology, which speaks of concepts and not of what exists (we lose the world).
- 4) It leads to dangerous dreams of an anthropocentric world (think of Bacon, think of Heidegger's discourses on technique, think of «the Western spirit that wants to dominate nature»). If everything is made up by us, we could think that we can completely rule on it.

As I have told before, I completely agree with the realist's urge. And I also agree with him when he sees in this extreme idealistic position a threat to an honest and fallibilistic conception of reality –not only in science, but also in common sense. But I think that we can take the best from idealism without falling into the abyss of total subjectivism.

Now, the point 4) is evidently a meta-philosophical misunderstanding, and I think it does not even deserve a criticism. Simply, none of the contemporary expressions of a moderate transcendental idealism imply such a view. Davidson's words are just inoffensive rhetoric. What is envisaged here is not, of course, a kind of *magic idealism*, like Novalis's one. Nor I think that our concepts could *change* any basic form of reality. It is not a blind optimism. I can describe in a million of different ways a bullet that enters my heart –I can even think that it is a superior Self who produces it– but it will

kill me anyway<sup>18</sup>. What I primarily ask, then, is to recognise that a mature transcendental idealism does not imply anything like that.

Point 3), if taken superficially, is not the problematic one. I *do* think that ontology must speak about reality, and not just about concepts, or mental representations, or *texts* à la Derrida<sup>19</sup>. And I think –and hope to show it– that my position does not imply such a misleading metaphysics. But if taken in its deepest sense, to say that ontology speaks of reality and not of concepts is a much more complex issue. In a certain way, ontology must think critically also of the language it uses to describe reality. And it is not clear how to draw the line between a priori laws of *objects* (reality), and a priori laws of *subjects* (concepts). This is a central and well-known metaphysical problem, but I will not deal with it here.

On the contrary, points 1) and 2) are really serious –even more than one could think. In the next chapters I try to analyse them. In doing that, I hold these two ideas, which are the very nucleus of a minimal transcendental idealism:

A) Reality, in its only useful sense, depends on our *possible experience*.

B) We can avoid a sheer and inconsistent relativism, but we must admit a certain ontological pluralism.

Later, I shall summarise the positive gains of my criticism and return back to the first definition given of metaphysical realism – reality as independent from the mental.

## **4. Ontology and epistemology**

### **4.1. The risk of an epistemological collapse**

The first objection of the realist is the preferred nowadays, and surely the most dangerous one. Ferraris underlines it in almost each of his papers<sup>20</sup>. I can resume it like that: *ontology is the realm of what there is, and epistemology the realm of what can be known: for no reason the two realms must coincide a priori. There has been a great confusion, probably originated by Kant's Copernican revolution, according to which the plan of existence has been made dependent from the plan of what we know*<sup>21</sup>.

Ferraris provides a lot of nice examples directed against this confusion (which he calls the «transcendental fallacy»)<sup>22</sup>. As a positive account, he offers what we can call an *ecological ontology* –the philosophical daughter (or sister) of naïve physics. It is a kind of realistic descriptive metaphysics: reality stands there independently from us, and we just have to analyse its own structures.

What is wrong with such a position? Almost nothing, but the old Kantian refrain: how can we reach –how can we have experience of– a world which is *completely* independent from us, that is a priori said to be set apart from any influence of our mind? If ontology is a talk about reality, well, no ontology is possible if we suppose such a reality –simply because to talk about it we firstly have the chance to get it. Kant recognised this problem, while he tried to overpass humean scepticism. His answer was that reality must partly depend on the mental –in his terminology, from the a priori structures of the transcendental subject<sup>23</sup>.

It is very important, taking these core idea from Kant, not to mistake the reality in itself for the «real world», as we were losing it. Kant's *an sich* dimension is just an empty concept, free of any ontological weight<sup>24</sup>. The point is not that our a priori structures give us *false information* about the *real* world: all the rhetoric about the «veil of perception» (that would hide reality behind its distorted representation) is to be dismissed. Simply, the *real* world is the one we grasp according to our structure.

I have said that this is an old argument. It is so old that it has become even *boring*, as Trigg once noticed<sup>25</sup>. So of course Ferraris knows it. What he arguments against it, goes like that: *again, reality is not just what we can know about it; for example, if I bump into something into a darkened room, I do not know it, but it surely hurts me. Say, we can conceptualise reality, we can speak about it and describe it as we want, but it itself stands there, as it is, ignoring our knowledge and our concepts*<sup>26</sup>.

This is, of course, a very sketchy abstract of Ferraris's deep thesis. He correctly sees, in my opinion, that to make reality dependent on our knowledge (that is ontology collapsing into epistemology) is too committing. There are a lot of things that knowledge –if intended in the *sheer* way as I think Ferraris intends it– cannot cover: holes, instant aches, rhetoric, gestures, shadows, itching, tumbling down from a chair

and so on. I cannot say that I perceive something only if and when I *know* it. So, knowledge does not exhaust the whole reality<sup>27</sup>.

What should we conclude, then?

#### 4.2. Possible experience

The point is that reality does not have to collapse in such an extreme way into epistemology. All that is required is a minimal form of transcendentalism. Say, that reality depends on *possible experience*, and not on *possible knowledge*. I think that it is exactly here that lies most of the perplexity. Talking of epistemic constraints and relations can be misleading. It is possible, in a more indulgent reading of transcendentalism, to consider reality as not implying a straight epistemic (intended in terms of a *scientific* conceptual scheme) dependence, but simply an *experiential* one. Say, that reality depends on a core of minimal a priori laws of the experiencing (not knowing) subject.

With this switch, things work better. Let us pay attention to the central idea of *possibility*. To say that what exists is just the sum of all our present perceptions would be a re-edition of Berkeley's straight idealism –*esse est percipi*, which is not what we envisage. On the contrary, we say that reality depends on our possible experience, considered in a chain of a priori laws. Which does not mean that any perception must be real –for example, to see a pink dragon is *possible*, but of course it is not real. Reality requires the connection with both formal and material conditions: but the latter are to be considered in a broader range than the simple actual perception. To recall Kant's famous example, it is possible that there are people on the moon, *even if no one has perceived them yet*: but that means just that in the *progression* of our experience we could meet them<sup>28</sup>.

More generally, we can perceive something which transcends our knowledge (it is actually very easy), but we cannot grasp a reality which completely transcends our possible *experience*. We could imagine it, of course –but what would it look like? It is nothing at all: Kant's *noumenon*, an empty concept.



So the aim of a descriptive ontology, to answer Ferraris, is to reveal the structures of our commonsense possible experience<sup>29</sup>.

Have we reached the shore, then? Not yet. There is still a troubled sea to cross.

The most serious problem concerns the range of this experience. If we say that reality depends on *our* possible experience, well, what about *dogs'* reality? Are we to say that they live in *another* world? And what about bats, then? And worms? And *viruses*? There is, as Blackburn already recognised, a writhing danger of *absolutism* into such a position: say, the impossibility to make sense of any other perspective rather than ours<sup>30</sup>.

So it seems that we are put back to Thomas Nagel's issues<sup>31</sup>. If we say that for example every species has its own world we run directly towards a metaphysical suicide. The result would be a lot of separate realities that we cannot share. The conclusion is simply false, because I share my world with my dog, and –alas– also with the virus of flu.

Thus, if we want to be as honest as we can with the definition of reality as depending on possible experience, we also must be more tolerant –and more precise.

I think that we can split the problem into three parts:

- We must admit a ground of reality which is totally independent from any perceptual structures or conceptual scheme. I shall call this bare concept *the wall of the given*<sup>32</sup>. Every being that we can experience is, like us, submitted to this law: *reality is given to it* –there is a material necessity it cannot avoid, even if it can receive it in many different ways (the worm doesn't see anything, the bat perceives reality by a sonar, the man with his senses and his concepts etc.).
- We can say that we share the world with animals who have a perceptual structure similar to ours. The more the structure is different from us, the more it will be difficult to interact with them<sup>33</sup>. In this sense, the world we share is a common set of possible experiences<sup>34</sup>.
- Anyway, for any minimal action or thought or step into what we call our human life, we must admit that we live in a conceptualised world, thus partly determined by the

mental (if we want to call it like that). This is the only world we can already begin to call a «world».

Let's consider this progression. The *wall of the given* is just the awareness that reality is always given to any sentient being we can consider. This is the main difference between a moderate transcendental idealism and a sheer one –for the latter, reality is *created* by the Self, and not simply perceived<sup>35</sup>. The world determined by common perceptive structures is just a bit more complex. But it is a *vague* world, a world that, in the end, is reduced to another abstraction.

The only reality which really interests us –because is *here* that we live, in a world made by tables, phones, cars, trees, and other people– lies in the third step we have considered. This is the object of a descriptive metaphysics, and the ground of our practical and even theoretical life: the commonsense world, Husserl's world-of-life<sup>36</sup>.

I would add: it is just here that a philosophical investigation begins. What Strawson envisaged in *Individuals* is a description of *our* reality –of our parting the world in objects of medium size which we can re-identify etc<sup>37</sup>. It is fundamentally that, which interests us in a philosophical account of the world<sup>38</sup>.

Now the realist could say: why all this metaphysics? Isn't it simpler to say that reality is reality in itself? Well, of course it is. And when I speak of the world, I speak of the *world*, not of our experience considered in progression! But if taken at face value, his words run the same risk we wanted to avoid –the danger of an inaccessible reality<sup>39</sup>.

I could have spoken of a reality-for-us, as it is matter of habit for many transcendentalists. If I did not, it was just because I wanted to avoid a terminology which can be misleading –which can smell of *interpretation, relativism*, and so on. But if correctly intended, I do not have any problem with this concept. It pictures exactly the way things are –once we understand that to talk of a reality-for-us is simply to talk of the *only reality that makes sense for us*.

## 5. Ontological pluralism and grounding

Let us now consider the criticism number 2): *idealism leads to relativism, or even to scepticism, because every conceptual scheme seems to be equal, without an independent reality*. In fact, if we admit a plurality of conceptual schemes, then we admit a plurality of *worlds*, as it seems to follow from our premise. Which of these is the *real* world? And how can we ground our knowledge, if reality is already conceptualised under one of these schemes?

This is another very old issue. It has been noticed mostly with the contrast between our commonsense world, and the scattered world of contemporary physics<sup>40</sup>. I will split the problem into its two main parts: first, the question of relativism and the multiplication of worlds; then, the one about grounding.

### 5.1. Ontological pluralism

I start with a well-known example of Putnam's<sup>41</sup>. Consider a little world made of just three individuals. How many objects are there, in a world like that? The answer seems obvious: three. But if we adopt another conceptual scheme, for example the one of mereology, the world will consist of *seven* objects –the individuals and their mereological sums. So even the cardinality of a model depends on the choice of a conceptual system. Reality cannot be a totality of forms and objects, as these categories were already given and not partially constructed by us.

In discussing this argument, John Searle says that it simply shows that we can *describe* reality in many ways –but not that it can be influenced by that. Are there three objects, or seven? It depends on the criterion we pick up. «But the real world does not care how we describe it and it remains the same under the various different descriptions we give of it»<sup>42</sup>.

The question now is: what is the criterion of identity of this supposed *real world*? How can we say that it remains the *same* (in a *strict* sense, because here we are talking of a strict sense of equivalence), if its characteristics change in such a way? The strangest thing is that then Searle goes on like that:

*once we have fixed the meaning of such terms in our vocabulary by arbitrary definition, it is no longer a matter of any kind of relativism or arbitrariness whether representation-independent features of the world satisfy those definitions, because the features of the world that satisfy or fail to satisfy the definition exist independently of those as any other definitions.*<sup>43</sup>

This is *exactly* what Putnam meant! After having defined what we count as an object, it is not our «mind» that determines the number of them into our little world. *It is reality itself*<sup>44</sup>. So I cannot understand why Searle defends the existence of a reality *an sich* under the ones described by different conceptual schemes. A world like that –just like a world which goes beyond our possible experience– is, in Goodman’s words, a reality which is *not worth to fight for*.

Of course, here we can begin to feel again the same form of fear. We are left with a number of different worlds, but the world is just *one*. How can we put together these contrasting intuitions<sup>45</sup>?

Here it is necessary to be courageous. There is no privileged reality that we can take as the *one*, or the *true one*, from which all the others originated by simple concept-switches. Better, we can take, in a very *pragmatic* sense, the ontology of common sense as the one on which we are, by tacit agreement, the most simple and practical to refer to, in finding a criterion of identity between all those «worlds ». As Goodman puts it,

We might, though, take the real world to be that of some one of the alternative right version (or groups of them bound together by some principle of reducibility or translatability) and regard all others as versions of that same world differing from the standard version in accountable ways. [...] *For the man-in-the-street, most versions form science, art, and perception depart in some ways from the serviceable world he has jerry-built from fragments of scientific and artistic tradition, and from his own struggle for survival. This world, indeed, is the one most often taken as real; for reality in a world, like realism in picture, is largely a matter of habit.*<sup>46</sup>

This is surely «the» world, in a non-committing (non-philosophical) sense: because it is the most *shared*. But if we take the world as a philosophical concept, well, then we must accept relativity at face. Reality is always given into a conceptual scheme, and –from a theoretic point of view– no ontology is more «real» than the others.

There is only one way to save the unity of the world, if we want to. Say, to take it as a *transcendental idea*. I take this suggestion from Giulio Preti. Following a neo-Kantian

inspiration, Preti writes that we must consider the world as a «function merely *regulative* and not *constitutive*, say something which assigns a task and points a direction, *not* like something we can consider as already actual»<sup>47</sup>.

Preti, anticipating Putnam's ideas on conceptual relativity, insists on the impossibility to determine a unique Ontology valid for all schemes. So, «one cannot say that the unity of «real world» is something effectual, nor that it is something impossible: it is, indeed, an *idea of reason*»<sup>48</sup>. *Philosophically*, the world can be posed just as a transcendental law, not given and never accomplished, but to construct. A regulative *Grenzbegriff*, completely lacking of ontological commitment.

Preti concludes:

But (and with that we close this chapter), as we have seen, common sense doesn't constitute a «real world» –so it doesn't give us a possible material first ontology, where the various regional ontologies can be recomposed. The unity of science is possible only «above», say in the construction of a unique ideal, but formal language: so, if we can speak of a «real world», we can do it just in a formal sense, while materially we must continue to live in a multiplicity of different ontologies, though having indefinite possibilities to communicate, and to go back more or less indirectly to that common sense which has the mobility and the fluidity of life and history.<sup>49</sup>

So we can say that the *pragmatic* retrocession to the commonsense world, and the *ideal* conversion towards the theoretically intended «world», don't exclude each other but on the contrary, in a certain sense, they complete themselves mutually<sup>50</sup>.

## 5.2. Grounding

The other problem is strictly connected. Any conceptual scheme seems to have its own rights. How can we distinguish a good ontology from a bad one, then? Aren't we left, again, with a total relativism, where just internal coherence is the criterion to pick up a description?

The answer is no. We can distinguish, even if a Davidsonian will not agree, between a conceptual scheme and its experiential inputs. The only move to add is that these inputs will be already, at least partially, conceptualised. That is to say –we must suppose

an already-conceptualised world X on which we put our new conceptual adds (schemes), obtaining a new picture of the world, Y<sup>51</sup>.

I propose a very simple example. Consider an object, say a red cube. In describing this cube, I am supposed to have some concepts, like *cube*, *red*, etc. I may have just the minimal ones. Let's now call the red cubes bigger than y, «z-cubes». Now, what I need to put this concept in front of experience's tribunal, is just to go and see if the red cube I have got is bigger than y or not. So the last step towards reality is here the perception itself of a red cube –which shows implicitly (as if they were *condensed into it*) concepts like *object*, *position*, *identity*, *red* etc. In this example, the active conceptual part is the predicate «z-cube»; the rest is what we would call the material input.

But –again– it is the world that decides if I am applying my concepts in a good or in a bad way. To say that it is already partially conceptualised is not to say that we are its sovereigns: it is just to assure that we can have an epistemic, or even experiential, relation with it. Even the world we *live* in is largely inherited –we see *cats and tables*, not merely *x and y*. If I see a cat, in our normal daily experience, I *normally* see something which is already conceptualised<sup>52</sup>. I could not even talk of it, if it was not. But this does not mean in any way that I can say that a dog is a cat, or that cats fly<sup>53</sup>.

## 6. A minimal idealism

Now we can sum up the results we got in our journey between realism and antirealism. The wheat we are harvesting is not very sweet, maybe, but I hope that at least is honest.

- Reality, as we have seen, depends on *possible experience*: so, there is a sense in which it depends on its perceiver. How should we intend exactly the word «experience», is matter of a long descriptive ontological work<sup>54</sup>. This does not imply a collapse of ontology onto epistemology. The most important result of this distinction, I think, is to keep the plans as separated as possible into a descriptive metaphysics (though the dream of a totally pure core of commonsense experience, not even culture-or-science-contaminated, is *just a dream*).

- It is possible to admit a certain ontological pluralism, without falling into relativism. In the frame of a prescriptive metaphysics, many ontologies can be proposed, and many of them can be correct at the same time (it depends on conventions adopted, from the grade of pluralism introduced, and also from our intellectual honesty). Here we can refer substantially to what Putnam theorized as conceptual relativity<sup>55</sup>. The fear for a multiplication of worlds which descend from that, can be avoided if we think their unity as a *transcendental idea*.
- Not *any* convention or conceptual scheme is good. As Putnam writes, «knowledge is not a story with no constraints except *internal* coherence; but it does deny that there are any inputs *which are not themselves to some extent shaped by our concepts*»<sup>56</sup>. Reality judges our theories, and what we propose must always be tested on it, in a fallibilistic spirit.

A good application of this kind of model can be found, in the spirit of a refined scientific realism, in Fano (2005). In order to provide an explanation about the reality of theoretical objects in science, Fano states that any theory must suppose (or at least conceive) a *possible perceiver*<sup>57</sup>. He also considers possible experience as a concept to be continually refined, and that cannot be determined before any scientific theory: on the contrary, this kind of analysis (a descriptive metaphysics) follows science and shares with it the character of fallibility. The correspondences between science and experience are determined in forms of analogies –for example, the analogy between our three-dimensional perceived space and the concept of a proper physical three-dimensional space<sup>58</sup>.

Thus, mixing a minimal transcendentalism with the urge for an honest philosophy of science, Fano proposes a theory of partial truth and partial reality of theories and theoretical terms, based on a kind of «gradual» ontology<sup>59</sup>.

Let us go back to our tree, now. Do you remember it? A tree falls into a desert forest: does it make any noise, if nobody hear it? Now we can answer to this question.

The minimal idealist says that *yes*, in fact the tree produces a noise, *but* this does not mean that we can consider it as a demonstration that a reality in itself exists. Why? Well, because in imaging a situation like that –say, without any observer– we are

already committed with *our* conceptual scheme. As Ernest Sosa states clearly, to suppose a world  $w$  in which there are no humans (and then, it seems, there is *nothing for us*, as we existence depends on possible experience), is done always in *our world*  $x$ : thus  $w$  is relative to  $x$ <sup>60</sup>. This is all the existential relativity that we need, and it is enough to preserve a clear idea of objectivity.

The sheer realist may growl again: *well, this changes nothing. If you agree with me that the world has existed long before the rise of life on the planet –and you do– then it seems that you make a big concession to my position.* Again, this can be avoided quite easily. Of course the world has existed before the rise of life, men and conceptual schemes. But as we think about it, we cannot avoid thinking about it through our structure.

Thus, in the end, *minimal idealism and mature realism converge onto the same point*<sup>61</sup>.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Smith (2004). In my paper I will sometimes make Barry Smith and Maurizio Ferraris play the role of the Evil. I hope that everybody understands that it is just in sign of respect for their immensely stimulating works. I also hope that in the end the differences between my point of view and theirs will seem less deep than one could think.

<sup>2</sup> *ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> *ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> This is particularly cruel. As it is known that postmodern ideas are frequently object of derision in the analytical panorama, to associate idealism with postmodernism is a move to underline its extremism and its oddness. But as I am going to show, a moderate idealism has nothing to do with Lyotard and friends.

<sup>5</sup> *When* and *why* this fear began to spread itself in analytical philosophy, are good questions. Historical remarks are not what I am interested into now, but I think that we must go back until the reaction to Dummett's and middle-Putnam's thesis, say around 1978-1981. I also think that much misunderstanding came from some imprecise readings of Kant's philosophy –especially about the question of the thing in itself. This concept –which is *just a concept*, even if Kant is sometimes surely misleading about it– was thought to be ontologically committed, like a real *thing* which presses against the subject. Of course, this involves a contradiction that needs to be solved, as the first interpreters of Kant, like Jacobi, Schulze and Maimon, already noticed. For a better reading, consider the classical Cassirer (1907).

<sup>6</sup> Here I intend antirealism as a form of *global* antirealism, say a negation of the core thesis of metaphysical realism (see *infra*). But the terminology must be refined. I take it as provisory, and I hope that my use of the term *idealism* may not be (again!) misunderstood. I shall use also *transcendentalism* in referring to it –even if it is a very varied form of. For the liaisons between Putnam's antirealism and transcendentalism, see Brown (1988).

<sup>7</sup> Smith's paper is directed against this very idea. Correctly, Smith consider ontology as a talk about *reality* and not just about our concepts: «Intuitively, a good ontology is one which corresponds to reality as it exists beyond our concepts. If, however, knowledge itself is identified with knowledge of our concepts, and if an ontology is a mere specification of a conceptualization, then the distinction between good and bad ontologies seems to lose its foothold», Smith (2004). But a minimal transcendental idealist agrees completely with his urge.

<sup>8</sup> Rorty (1979), for example –as his title shouts.

<sup>9</sup> As, for example, McDowell (1994) seems to do in many ways. The position I defend is nearer to Putnam's internal realism. What I do not like of it, is its irremediable vagueness. I could define my moderate idealism as a tentative to clarify some elusive points of internal realism.

<sup>10</sup> Putnam (1990, 30). The third character can be dismissed in some forms of more sophisticated realism.

<sup>11</sup> This was, for example, the position of the first Putnam.

<sup>12</sup> See Smith (1996).

<sup>13</sup> Devitt (1984, 2).

<sup>14</sup> Smith (1996, 189).

<sup>15</sup> Fichte held something like that. Even this may sound strange to the contemporary debate, his theory is not just an odd curiosity of XIX century. Unfortunately, Russell considered it like that in his *History of Western Philosophy*.

<sup>16</sup> We can say that Wittgenstein and Schopenhauer, with some differences, held this position.

<sup>17</sup> Davidson (1997, p. 109).

<sup>18</sup> Hilary Putnam puts it like that, with a naughty irony I appreciate very much: «to hold that every conceptual system is therefore just as good as every other would be something else. If anyone really believed that, and if they were foolish enough to pick a conceptual system that told them they could fly and to act upon it by jumping out of a window, they would, if they were lucky enough to survive, see the weakness of the latter view at once», Putnam (1981, 54).

<sup>19</sup> A moderate idealist does *not* consider the world just as his representation, as much as he does not phone to his girlfriend using the mental representation of his mobile. To say that reality is shaped by our concepts, it is not to say that just our concepts exist. Kant himself has been accused of this, as for him we can have experience just of phenomena and not of reality in itself. This is a typical example of the mistaken readings of Kant I was talking about in note n. 9. Phenomena are *things*, the normal things we handle every day, or the objects of scientific enterprise. Kant operates an ideal reconstruction of the process of their constitution. He certainly did not want to make them disappear into mental representation.

<sup>20</sup> See especially Ferraris (2001). The inspiration comes from Searle (1995).

<sup>21</sup> For the Kantian roots of this switch, see Ferraris (2004). Even if this book is very brilliant, I personally do not agree in many ways with its interpretation. I consider it too idealistic, and sometimes frankly mistaken (for example, when he considers Kant's representations as mental images; or when he speaks about the Transcendental Self as something *always conscious*, mixing logical and psychological issues, etc.).

<sup>22</sup> The nicest one is the «argument of the slipper», in Ferraris (2001). Showing how men, animals, and even another slipper reacts in some similar ways in bumping into a slipper on their way, Ferraris concludes that they all share the *same world* –a world where, at least at this level, conceptual schemes and transcendental constraints simply do not exist.

<sup>23</sup> When Kant talks about a transcendental subject, he makes a logical abstraction valid for *all* human beings –so the a priori structures he found lead to a new type of objectivism– a kind of intersubjectivism. I think that *mental* is a very vague and misleading expression to define positions like this one.

<sup>24</sup> For example, Alai (1994) fails to understand this point. Again, a good comprehension of Kant's *Ding an sich* is essential to understand the themes of the modern debate on realism and antirealism.

<sup>25</sup> See Trigg (1980, 1). But he adds that «this obvious point very often provides the starting point for major philosophical doctrines about the relationship between thought and reality, between and there is and what we think there is», *ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> Ferraris (2004, 68), refers also to Dretske's distinction of a *simple seeing* and an *epistemic seeing*: we can have complex experience even without a full competence or knowledge of them. The refrain is always the same: on one hand ontology, and on the other epistemology.

<sup>27</sup> I think that a big problem of McDowell (1994) is the absence of a clear distinction between a minimal conceptualization (*à la* Strawson) and a more committing (epistemic, scientific) one. He just speaks of already-conceptualised inputs, without nuances, and without a clear analysis of the phenomenology of perception. His position should be analysed also at light of recent psychological discovers about non-conceptual experiences (in the frame of another well-known debate). However, his idea of a *second nature* permeating our “animal” structure is very interesting, and is worth a deeper reflection. For what concerns Putnam's internalism, the conclusions are quite similar. Putnam takes reality as dependent from a conceptual scheme –but he does not think, like McDowell, that all our experience has to be permeated by concepts. This is partly correct, but still too elusive.

<sup>28</sup> Alai (1994, 62) states that to consider unknowable the world in itself is incoherent, because it is like to state that we would not be able to discover an unknown land. It should be clear now that this is a misunderstanding of Kant's dimension of possibility.

<sup>29</sup> Anyway, it is still a matter of real interest to understand what Kant exactly tried to do in his first *Critique*: a theory of experience, or a theory of knowledge? Must we put him among the descriptive metaphysicians, as Strawson wants to, or among the prescriptive ones? In my opinion –and here I agree with Ferraris (2004)– Kant confused the two levels. Sometimes he seems to propose that the a priori laws discovered into the first *Critique* are valid for *any* experience. But if we do not stop here, and we look also at the other two *Critiques*, the question becomes more problematic. Probably, in refining his transcendentalism, Kant thought to have enucleated the a priori laws for knowledge (*pure reason*), ethics (*practical reason*) and aesthetics (*capacity of judgment*). So Strawson's Kant would not be the *real* Kant –but a very useful way to apply Kant's ideas. Anyway, the issue is not closed at all.

<sup>30</sup> See Blackburn (1994).

<sup>31</sup> See Nagel (1974). The problem is right how to make sense of another type of experience, such as the one of bats'.

<sup>32</sup> This is not, of course, the given datum of the empiricists.

<sup>33</sup> Let us imagine some aliens who moves *through* objects, or who possess a completely different system of perception. Shall we say that we share the *same world* with them? Again, consider if one day –after a nuclear disaster, for example– all humanity would develop a third eye which completely changes our old relation to reality. What *would reality be*, then? The former one? The latter? The answer is, again, that it depends from our possible experience. A reality completely *an sich* is unconceivable.

<sup>34</sup> This is a central point, and it should be developed more. Here I add just some remarks and ideas for a future research. First: I think that the sharing of a common possible experience may be reduced to the Wittgensteinean concept of *form of life*. This is a quite vague concept, but it well captures what I mean. We can share a world if we share a form of life. Second, a Kantian remark. What we have got here is a transcendentalism contaminated, as already Putnam correctly viewed, even by cultural and *biological* constraints (see Putnam (1981,55)). So the fate of the transcendental, which started into a totally *logical*

horizon, seems to enlarge itself towards new hints, more problematic, more complex. It opens itself to the influences of cognitive science and psychology of perception.

<sup>35</sup> It resembles to Devitt's «antirealism with a fig-leaf»: see Devitt (1984, 15). More precisely, this is the equivalent of the noumenic affection in Kant's philosophy. I am deeply convinced that critique realism *has* to be grounded in something that exceeds its limits. If we want *everything* to be deduced in our system, we have to burn it into the big I of sheer idealism. In this sense, a critique realism (or a transcendental idealism, which is the same) takes a gödelian nuance: reason is consistent because it is not complete.

<sup>36</sup> An important remark. The three «worlds» I talked about are not to be thought as ontologically committed. I'm not proposing an ontological pluralism *here*. The «wall of the given» and the world of «common perceptions» are just *abstractions* from our commonsense world of experience.

<sup>37</sup> The core idea is that –against the collapse of a sheer cultural relativism (where often small differences between cultural groups are immensely amplified)– we defend some invariants of human experience as it is shown *under* all possible local differences. A good concept to express that is Wittgenstein's idea of resemblance of family.

<sup>38</sup> But note that this does not deny us to think and imagine other possible ways to perceive it

<sup>39</sup> Ferraris, I guess, would object that such a minimal transcendentalism is no use, and that the real one (the Kantian one) is much more committing about epistemology. I cannot reply but this way: to say that a minimal transcendentalism like this is *odd*, or even *trivial*, does not imply anything on a theoretical plan. The metaphysical realist could say that his *façon de parler* is clearer and more adherent to our commonsense premises. But in commonsense the world is not a problem. It is just the world, it is OK. And if everything was already that OK, then why to waste time doing philosophy?

<sup>40</sup> Consider for example Sellars (1963), Goodman (1978), Putnam (1987), but also Cassirer (1955), and Eddington (1928).

<sup>41</sup> See Putnam (1987). I consider Putnam's conceptual relativity as totally correct, in epistemological cases like that.

<sup>42</sup> Searle (1995, 163).

<sup>43</sup> *ivi*, 166.

<sup>44</sup> Sosa (1998) proposes a similitude: the evaluation of indexical thoughts. If I say that the Empire State Building is 180 km south-west from *here*, the truth of my assertion is *relative* to my spatial position. But the fact that the Empire State Building is 180 km south-west from *that point* is not true *in virtue* of where I am right now. It is an objective fact even if I am elsewhere. Relativity goes in a similar way.

<sup>45</sup> In Putnam's example, we could think that a basic reality is seen in supposing three individuals as a starting point. But to say that the world is *really made* of individuals, would be adopting another God's-Eye Point of View, which is exactly what internal realism criticizes.

<sup>46</sup> Goodman (1978, 20), emphasis added. The point is that, of course, *this commonsense world is already worked by some basic concepts*. Which ones? Well, it's exactly here that the real work begins.

<sup>47</sup> Preti (1975, 120), my translation.

<sup>48</sup> *ivi*, 122, my translation.

<sup>49</sup> Preti (1975, 127-128), my translation.

<sup>50</sup> For further ideas in this direction, see also Preti (1976a) and (1976b).

<sup>51</sup> Actually, I think that the metaphor itself of a concept-adding is quite obscure, as all the metaphors concerning form and matter. More generally, the approach I am sketching here is just a base for a future research.

<sup>52</sup> Again, this is of course extremely sketchy. A fervent non-conceptualist would surely say, *well, and if you lack the concept of CAT (as, for example, infants and cats themselves) wouldn't you perceive the cat?* This is the standard objection. My answer is that *of course* even lacking the concept of CAT we perceive the same thing, even if there is an important sense in which we do not. It would be an experience –with its psychological and perceptual characteristics, which can be even *identical* to the conceptualised one– but it is not what interests us in most of philosophical accounts of the world. I agree with the non-conceptualist that perception can't be reduced to the possession of a concept. But for almost *all* the practices of human life, we do need concepts, and the world we talk about and live in is already highly permeated by them. In sum, I think that the whole debate between conceptualism and non-conceptualism is due to a different approach to perception. The former describes it in its pure phenomenology, and this is very reasonable: but the latter pushes us to admit that perception *must* be at least partly conceptualised –if it was not, we would not be able to justify our beliefs. So conceptualism, in the end, is a kind of transcendental argument. The task is to balance these two needs: the evidence of a non-conceptual part of our perception,

and the necessity of a conceptual content. But the issue is terribly complicated, and it is impossible to close it here.

<sup>53</sup> Oh, to tell the truth, I *could*. The activity of our *intellectus*, as Kant clearly saw, is so powerful that it can easily escape from the limits of possible experience. We can re-arrange our intuitions in a lot of ways: construct a drastically prescriptive metaphysics where everything turns different and even cats fly. But these are «dreams of a visionary». In constructing the most complex conceptual schemes –look for example at those of quantum physics, of religion, of metaphysics itself– we must observe not only the precept of respecting reality’s answers, but also the one I would call of *intellectual honesty*. This is something we could describe with Pascal’s *esprit de finesse*. Popper envisaged something similar when he accused the sheer conventionalists of “tricking” an honest epistemological research.

<sup>54</sup> As a starting point, I think that we must admit an irruption of factuality in defining the forms of possible experience –there must be some non-solved tension between the transcendental ego and the empirical one. So I personally think that any tentative of a *pure* foundation (*à la* Husserl too) is vane. But this does not mean that we must avoid the research into of minimal *conceptual* system of experience –in a Strawsonian spirit (for example cause, permanence in space and time etc.). I am afraid that Ferraris’s ontology, in its avoiding every kind of contamination by concepts, language, and epistemology, risks to fall from the other side of the plan. It risks, say, to *collapse on physiology or psychology of perception*.

<sup>55</sup> See Putnam (1987), (1990) and (2004).

<sup>56</sup> Putnam (1981, 54).

<sup>57</sup> «Then it seems reasonable to assume that all the theoretical objects of science that want to be real, must obey to some principles concerning *possible experience*», Fano (2005, 181), my translation.

<sup>58</sup> A similar idea has been proposed by Preti (1976a), in terms of a «pickwickean correspondence» between the philosophical concept of «world» and the world postulated by common sense.

<sup>59</sup> Fano (2005, 183-190). The core idea is that a theory is partially true when we can single out at least one physical system that is similar to a model according to the chosen hypothesis. In this way, a theoretical term M of a theory T(M) is partially real if there is an X that makes T(X) partially true. So we can speak of grades of reality of theoretical terms. As basic criterions to attribute existence, Fano propose causality and invariance, always considered within a conceptual frame.

<sup>60</sup> Sosa (1993, 624).

<sup>61</sup> This paper has been originally written in December 2005. Many thanks to the referee who helped me, one year later, to revise it and correct it.