

New Realism: A Short Introduction¹

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From Postmodernism to Realism

NEW REALISM IS PERHAPS THE only philosophical movement of which one may indicate the exact date of birth: it was June 23, 2011 at 13.30 at the restaurant “Al Vinacciolo” in Via Gennaro Serra 29, Naples. I can be so accurate because I was there, with Markus Gabriel and his Italian collaborator Simone Maestroni, after a seminar at the Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies. Markus was founding an international centre of philosophy in Bonn and wanted to inaugurate it with a big conference. I told him that the right title would have been “New Realism”, since it captured what in my opinion was the fundamental character of contemporary philosophy: a certain weariness of postmodernism and the belief that everything is constructed, by language, conceptual schemes and the media. Well, it is not like that: something, or rather, much more than we are willing to admit, is not constructed – and this is a wonderful thing, otherwise we could not distinguish dreams from reality. I announced the conference a few weeks later, in an article published in “La Repubblica” on August 8, 2011, and since

¹ I elaborated this article in Bonn with the support of Käte Hamburger Kolleg “Recht als Kultur”. I wish to thank especially its director, Professor Werner Gephart.

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then the debate has never ceased, both in Italy and abroad², with contributions that include many of my writings on the subject,³ the book by Markus Gabriel⁴ and that by Mauricio Beuchot and José Luis Jerez.⁵

Realism, just as idealism, empiricism or skepticism, is a constant theme in philosophy. **New Realism**, instead, is a reoccurring function: the reaction to a previous anti-realist hegemony. It was so in the case of American New Realism last century,⁶ with Brazilian Novo Realismo thirty-five years ago⁷ and it is so in the case of contemporary New Realism, which was launched by my manifesto on August 8, 2011 (which, besides, summarized what I have been working on for the past twenty years).⁸ That this should happen in Europe, where postmodernism has been most influential, is not coincidental. “New realists” come from continental philosophy, where the weight of antirealism was far greater than in analytic philosophy.⁹ Both traditions shared a premise: there is not a

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- 2 For a full press review, see [http //nuovorealismo.wordpress.com](http://nuovorealismo.wordpress.com). For an analysis of the debate, see R. Scarpa, *Il caso Nuovo Realismo. La lingua del dibattito filosofico contemporaneo* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2013).
 - 3 See in particular “Nuovo Realismo”, in *Rivista di estetica*, 48 (3/2011), pp. 69-93, and my *Manifesto of NewRealism* (New York: SUNY Press, 2014).
 - 4 M. Gabriel, *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt* (Berlin: Ullstein, 2013).
 - 5 M. Beuchot - J.- L. Jerez, *Manifiesto del nuevo realismo analógico* (Buenos Aires: Circulo Erméneutico 2013).
 - 6 E. B. Holt, W. T. Marvin, W. P. Montague, R. B. Perry, W. B. Pitkin, E. G. Spaulding, *The New Realism: Cooperative Studies in Philosophy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912).
 - 7 A. de Hollanda, *O Novo sistema Neo-Realista* (Fortaleza: Ceara, 1978).
 - 8 See *Estetica razionale* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 1997). The theme of realism lies at the centre of my conversations with Derrida between 1993-1995: J. Derrida and M. Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret* (Ithaca-London, Cornell UP, 2001). For a brief overview, see “Maurizio Ferraris” in Wikipedia.
 - 9 Where, to put it with 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” (“The Current State of Speculative Realism”, *Speculations IV* (2013), p. 23). For a more detailed analysis, see M. Ferraris, “Introduction”, in T. Andina (ed.), *Bridging the Analytical Continental Divide* (Leiden-New York: Brill, 2014).

“thing in itself”, but only phenomena mediated (or created) by our conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatuses, and it is in this sense that both traditions have been affected by a “linguistic turn”. But the linguistic turn was the result of a conceptual breakthrough, characterized by a prevalence of the concept in the construction of experience¹⁰ (and not, as it would be entirely reasonable to posit, in the *reconstruction* of experience, in scientific or philosophical description).

If, however, for analytical philosophers the problem was epistemological (“to what extent do conceptual schemes and language intervene in our view of the world?”), for continental thinkers the problem was political. Following what I have proposed to call fallacy of knowledge-power,¹¹ postmodernism has cultivated the idea that reality is actually constructed by power for purposes of domination, and that knowledge is not a means for emancipation, but an instrument of power. I shall dub “Foukant” the philosophical function lying at the basis of this attitude, because (like Kant) it believes that we do not have direct access to knowledge and that the I think must necessarily accompany our representations, and (like Foucault, in the first phase of his thought) it deems that the I think and our conceptual schemes are means for the affirmation of the will to power. Thus, in radical postmodernism, a logical step is taken so that reality is 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”).

It was first of all politics that undermined postmodern hopes of emancipation.¹² The advent of media populism provided the example of a farewell to reality that was not at all emancipatory, not to mention the unscrupulous use of truth as an ideological construction, which got to the point of start-

10 See J. McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

11 M. Ferraris, *Manifesto del Nuovo Realismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2012), 87 and ff.

12 Ibid, 3 and ff.

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ing a war on the bases of false evidence of weapons of mass destruction. In the media and in several political programs we have seen the real outcome of Nietzsche's principle that "There are no facts, only interpretations", which only a few years earlier philosophers proposed as the way to emancipation, but which in fact presented itself as the justification for saying and doing whatever one wanted. Thus the true meaning of Nietzsche's motto turned out to be rather: "The reason of the strongest is always the best." This circumstance explains the slight gap in time between the end of antirealism in the analytic world¹³ and the end of antirealism in the continental world. Nevertheless, during the seventies and eighties, there was much analytical antirealism and continental antirealism was still present in the departments of comparative literature.

Both analytic and continental antirealisms find a powerful theoretical justification in **constructivism**, which represents the mainstream of modern philosophy.¹⁴ Such a perspective argues that our conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatuses play a role in the constitution of reality. It is a position that begins with Descartes and culminates in Kant; it was then radicalized in the nihilistic sense by Nietzsche, or specialized in the epistemological, hermeneutic and psychological sense by several other thinkers. The basic assumption of this function of thought, which I propose we call "Deskant", consists of two statements. The first is that we have a direct

13 Which can be located around the seventies, with Kripke, (S. A. Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980]) and Putnam (H. Putnam, "The meaning of 'meaning'", in *Mind, Language and Reality. Philosophical Papers, vol. 2.* [Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1975], 215-271).

14 D. R. Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1989). For a criticism of its contemporary outcomes, see P. Boghossian, *Fear of knowledge Against Relativism and Constructivism* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2007). I believe that it is constructivism - rather than the "correlationalism" questioned by Meillassoux (After Finitude, London, Continuum 2008) - that captures the main thread of modern philosophy, which does not simply lie in thinking about the object in correlation to the subject, but in conceiving of it as a result of a construction of the subject.

relationship with our cogito and a mediated one with the world; the second is that the mediation operated by thought and by the senses leads to the fact that the whole of reality turns out to be somewhat mind-dependent.

When constructivists illustrate this second thesis they seem to refer to indisputable evidence and highly recognizable actions. For example, Nietzsche asserts that our needs and our saying yes or no dissolve facts into interpretations. But if “there are no facts, only interpretations” is the maximalist slogan which postulates the world’s causal and conceptual dependence on thought, then the mere fact that a sentence like “there are no cats, only interpretations” is senseless makes it extremely doubtful that a strong dependence (either causal: concepts cause objects; or conceptual: our relationship with objects presents, in any case, a conceptual mediation) should be possible. So constructionism falls back on a weak dependence, i.e. representational dependence¹⁵: we are not the creators of the universe, but we still construct it starting from an amorphous *hyle*, a cookie dough for us to shape with the stencils of our concepts.¹⁶ Thus the separate existence of the world is acknowledged, but the world as such is taken to have no structural and morphological autonomy, at least not that we know of.

Ontology and Epistemology

That is where the first move of New Realism, namely conceptual clarification, takes place. If we try to give a concrete form to representational dependence, we will realize that the technical term hides a conceptual confusion between **ontology** (what there is, which is independent of our representations) and **epistemology** (what we think we know, and that *may* be dependent on our representations – but what makes our statements true are not our representations, but that to

15 R. Rorty, “Charles Taylor on Truth, in Truth and Progress”, in *Philosophical Papers*, vol. III, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 86.

16 H. Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 114.

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which those representations relate). According to representational dependence, an entity, say the Tyrannosaurus Rex (understood as a physical entity) is considered as if it were a zoological and linguistic notion, and it is concluded that, since in the absence of humans there would not be the word “Tyrannosaurus Rex”, then the Tyrannosaurus Rex “representationally” depends on people. Which is either a truism (if by “representationally” we mean something like “linguistically”) or a perfect absurdity (if by “representationally” we mean something - even slightly - more than that). Because this would imply that the being of the Tyrannosaurus Rex depends on us; but then, given that when the Tyrannosaurus Rex existed we did not, it would paradoxically follow that the Tyrannosaurus Rex both did and did not exist.¹⁷

The ontological hypothesis that underlies the distinction between ontology and epistemology is the one - indicated by Schelling’s positive philosophy - for which being is not something constructed by thought, but it is given before thought comes to be. Not only because we know of interminable periods in which there was the world, but there were no people, but also because what initially appears as thought actually comes from outside of us: the words of our mother, the myths and rules, the totems and taboos that we encounter in everyday life are just found by us, just like in Mecca one comes across a meteorite. Along this line, New Realism proposes its distinctions, schematized as follows.¹⁸

17 As is argued by D. Marconi, “Realismo minimale”, in M. De Caro and M. Ferraris, (eds.), *Bentornata Realtà* (Torino: Einaudi, 2012), 113-137.

18 For an articulated description, see M. Ferraris, *Documentality. Why is Necessary to Leave Traces* (New York: Fordham UP, 2012).

<p>EPISTEMOLOGY Amendable</p>	<p>ONTOLOGY Unamendable</p>
<p>Science Linguistic Historical Free Infinite Teleological</p>	<p>Experience Not necessarily linguistic Not historical Necessary Finite Not necessarily teleological</p>
<p>Truth not born out of experience, but teleologically oriented towards it</p>	<p>Reality not naturally oriented towards science</p>
<p>Internal World (=internal to conceptual schemes)</p>	<p>External World (=external to conceptual schemes)</p>

I will not go into a detailed explanation, which will be the subject of the next pages; I will only suggest the reasons for the confusion, which I consider to be fatal, between ontology and epistemology. This confusion was caused by Deskant, driven by the need to re-establish, through construction, a world with more stability, because it is assumed that nature as such is contingent.

In order to do so, what Deskant does is resort to what I propose we call **transcendental fallacy**¹⁹: if all knowledge begins with experience, but the latter is structurally uncertain, then it will be necessary to found experience through science, finding *a priori* structures to stabilize its uncertainty. To achieve this, we need a change of perspective: we have to start from the subjects rather than the objects, and ask ourselves – in accordance with the matrix of all subsequent construction-

¹⁹ For a detailed analysis of the transcendental fallacy, see M. Ferraris, *Goodbye Kant!, What still stands of the Critique of the Pure Reason* (New York: SUNY Press, 2013).

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ism - not how things are in themselves, but how they should be made in order to be known by us, following the model of physicists who question nature not as scholars, but as judges: that is, using schemes and theorems.

Deskant then adopts an *a priori* epistemology, i.e. mathematics, to found ontology: the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgments allows us to fixate an otherwise fluid reality through a certain knowledge. In this way, transcendental philosophy moved constructionism from the sphere of mathematics to that of ontology.²⁰ The laws of physics and mathematics are applied to reality and, in Deskant's hypothesis, they are not the contrivance of a group of scientists, but they are the way in which our minds and senses actually work. Our knowledge, at this point, will no longer be threatened by the unreliability of the senses and the uncertainty of induction, but the price we have to pay is that there is no longer any difference between the fact that *there is* an object X and the fact that we *know* the object X - that is, the confusion between ontology and epistemology, only partially avoided by Kant through the hypothesis of the noumenon (which post-Kantians did not hesitate to abandon).

Making perceptual experience (and not, as we will see shortly, social experience) depend on the conceptual means falling into what psychologists call "stimulus error": namely the ease with which we are led to mistake an observation for an explanation. It is the ease with which, with our eyes closed, we respond "nothing" or "black" to the question "what do you see?", when instead we are seeing phosphenes and gleams. Yet we do not account for those at a descriptive level, because what we are talking about is something else: a theory of vision for which the eye is like a camera obscura, and when the diaphragm is closed absolute darkness reigns. When one argues that observers equipped with different theories see reality differently²¹ one gives a philosophical

20 A. Ferrarin, "Construction and Mathematical schematism. Kant on the Exhibition of a Concept in Intuition", in *Kant-Studien*, 86, 1995, pp. 131-174.

21 T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of

dignity to a psychological error, and most importantly one makes a category mistake that lies in confusing seeing with knowing. For example, if I read the word “representational dependence” (sic) I think of “representational dependence”, but I see “representational dependence” (sic).

Now, it makes perfect sense to assume that there is a conceptual action when I recognize a constellation,²² or when, looking at three objects, I believe – like Leśniewski – that for every two objects there is one which is their sum, increasing the total number of objects.²³ But this conflict can be explained by the simple consideration that we cannot see properly neither constellations nor Leśniewski’s objects, but only the stars and the three objects of common sense.

This is not to argue that constellations are not real, but rather to draw a distinction (which obviously stems from the difference between ontology and epistemology) between two layers of reality that fade into each other. The first is what I would call ϵ -**reality**, meaning by this “epistemological reality”, or what the Germans call “Realität”. It is the reality linked to what we think we know about what there is (which is why I call it “epistemological”). This is the reality referred to by Kant when he says that “intuitions without concepts are blind”; or by Quine when he says that “to be is to be the value of a variable.” But next to, or rather below, the ϵ -reality I also set the ω -**reality** in the sense of $\delta\upsilon\tau\omega\varsigma$ (I use the omega just to make a distinction): the ontological reality, or what the Germans call “Wirklichkeit”, which refers to what there is whether we know it or not, and which manifests itself both as a resistance and as positivity. The ω -reality is the **external world**, expression by which, as we have seen in the scheme, I design the world external to conceptual schemes.

Chicago Press, 1962).

22 N. Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis, Hackett: 1978).

23 H. Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1987), chs. 1, 2; and “Truth and Convention: On Davidson’s Refutation of Conceptual Relativism”, *Dialectica* 41 (1987), 69–77 (reprinted in H. Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, [Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1990], 96–104).

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At this point it is better to introduce, next to the difference between ontology and epistemology, also a difference between **ontological independence** and **epistemological independence**. The way in which the problem of realism has been set in the analytical area defines realism as independence of *truth* from the knowledge we have of it. For New Realism, instead, it is independence of *reality* from the knowledge we have of it (although for certain classes of objects things are different). I believe this aspect is important because truth is, in any case, an epistemological function, which presupposes minds: a sentence like “On September 17, 1873 Bismarck had a flu” is causally independent of minds, but it presupposes minds. And so (we will get back to this) the formula of the independence of truth from the minds lends itself well to some aspects of social reality. On the other hand, when it comes to reality in its most general sense, I would define realism in the following terms: realism is the belief that natural objects (and possibly other types of objects to be specified every time) are independent of our means of knowing them; they are existent or non-existent in virtue of a reality existing independently of us.²⁴

Unamendability

The second move made by New Realism, after that of conceptual clarification, is empirical observation. There is a class of representations that the I think will never be able to accompany: that of the infinite number of things that existed before any I think. I call this argument **pre-existence**²⁵: the world is given prior to any cogito. Then there are classes of representations that, even though accompanied by the I think, seem to resist it, regardless of the “representational

24 Borrowing Dummett’s definition, although he spoke of “truth” instead of “reality” (M. Dummett, “Realism” (1963), later in *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Harvard University Press: 1978), 145-165.

25 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.

dependence”; I call this argument **resistance**²⁶: reality may oppose refusals to our conceptual schemes. And then it often happens that the I think successfully interacts with beings presumably devoid of any I think, for example with animals; I call this argument **interaction**: beings with different conceptual schemes can interact in the same world.

I collect these empirical circumstances – which, however, have a transcendental role, since they define, even though in retrospect, our possibilities of knowledge – under the name of **unamendability**²⁷: the key feature of what there is is its prevalence over epistemology, because it cannot be corrected – and this is, after all, an infinitely more powerful necessity than any logical necessity.

Unamendability is a **non-conceptual content**²⁸ and a contrastive principle, which manifests the real as not-I. It concerns the sphere of experience that lies outside of that of concepts, defining an extraneous world external to knowledge. Non-conceptual content is a contrast (resistance), something that cannot be nullified. At the same time, it is also an autonomous organisation of experience (interaction), which reduces the burden of the ordering activity that is attributed to conceptual schemes. It is in view of these circumstances that I have given a peculiar ontological value to the recovery of aesthetics as a theory of perception,²⁹ not because it is first and foremost a source of knowledge, but, on the contrary, because it can occasionally constitute a stumbling block for conceptual schemes. At least three consequences follow from this.

The first regards the **prevalence of ontology over epistemology**. In its resistance, the real is the extreme negative of knowledge, because it is the inexplicable and the incorrigible;

26 M. Ferraris, “Esistere è resistere”, in *Bentornata Realtà*, 139-165.

27 M. Ferraris, “Causality and Unamendableness”, in *Gestalt Theory*, 28:4 (2006), 401-407; M. Ferraris “Reality as Unamendability”, in L. Cataldi Madonna (ed.), *Naturalistische Hermeneutik* (Wuerzburg: Koenigshausen u. Neumann, 2013), 113-129.

28 G. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984)..

29 See M. Ferraris, *Experimentelle Ästhetik* (Vienna: Turia und Kant, 2001).

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but it is also the positive extreme of being, because it is what is given, insists and resists interpretation, and at the same time makes it true, distinguishing it from fantasy or wishful thinking. And we must not forget that in areas dependent on conceptual schemes, such as historical events, we are dealing with a clear manifestation of unamendability, which is the irrevocability of the past events on which the interpretations of historians are constructed. Now, interpretations take place on the basis of facts and facts occur in a world of objects. If this is the case, the acknowledgment of facts in the physical world (for example, the fact that snow is white) is placed at a perfectly continuous level with respect to the acknowledgment of facts in the historical and moral world.

Secondly, this does not mean in any way that reality coincides with the experience of the senses, or that unamendability comes down to perception. It simply means that unamendability deconstructs the claim of the ontologically constitutive action of conceptual schemes.³⁰ In the case of perception, we only have *one* area of unamendability, which happens to be of particular evidence because sometimes we experience an **aesthetic antinomy** with regard to conceptual schemes. The basic argument here does not consist in saying that the stick immersed in water appears broken because it really is broken, but to point out that, although we know that the stick immersed in water is not broken, we can do nothing *but* see it broken.³¹

Thirdly, we can draw from the aesthetic antinomy a more general point, which concerns the **ontological autonomy** of the world with regard to conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatuses. Reality has a structured nature which precedes conceptual schemes and can resist them. So there is no need to rely on an *a priori epistemology* to stabilize contingency. One of our most common experiences is that we interact

30 See P. Bozzi, *Fisica Ingenua* (Garzanti: Milano, 1990).

31 M. Ferraris, "Metzger, Kant and the Perception of Causality", in *The Dialogue. Yearbook of Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 1 (2001), 126-134, and M. Ferraris, "Why Perception Matters", *Phenomenology and Mind*, 4 (2013), 48-61..

with beings who have conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatuses different from our own (or that do not have such things at all), such as dogs, cats, flies and so forth. Well, if interaction depended on conceptual schemes and knowledge, it would be somehow miraculous. Unless we wish to resort to the hypothesis of a miracle or a pre-established harmony, we are forced to admit that interaction is made possible by the sharing of a common and homogeneous space, and of objects endowed with positivity that are independent of our conceptual schemes.

This is what I have illustrated elsewhere under the title **slipper experiment**,³² showing how it is a very common experience that there is interaction between beings with very different conceptual schemes, perceptual apparatuses, dimensions and forms of life. And the ability of superorganisms such as a termite moulds to structure complex articulations in the total absence of a central control system is widely studied by zoologists.³³ Of course, I never thought that myself, a dog and a constructivist all see the world the same way. I am saying that we can interact despite the fact that our conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatuses are different.

Affordance

Hence the third move of New Realism. If things are as I have described above, then reality does not only manifest itself as resistance and negativity: every negation entails a determination and a possibility. The world exerts an **affordance**,³⁴

32 M. Ferraris, *Il Mondo Esterno* (Milano: Bompiani, 2001), 90-91. The *Gedankenexperiment* through which I develop the argument of interaction appears in English in M. Ferraris, "What is it Like to be a Slipper", in *The Dialogue*, 1 (2002), 164-169.

33 Hölldobler and E.O. Wilson, *The Superorganism: The Beauty, Elegance, and Strangeness of Insect Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton & C., 2008).

34 By using the term "affordance" I am referring to a notion that has been widely popular last century: see J.J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979); K. Lewin, "Untersuchungen zur Handlungs- und Affekt-Psychologie. I. Vorbemerkung über die psychischen Kräfte und Energien und über die Struktur der Seele",

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through the objects and the environment, that qualifies as a **positive realism**.³⁵ Strong, independent and stubborn, the world of objects that surround us (including the subjects we interact with, which are another kind of objects) does not merely say no: it does not only resist us, as if to say “here I am, I am here.” It is also the greatest ontological positivity, because its very resistance, opacity and refusal to come to terms with concepts and thought are what assures us that the world of objects we deal with is not a dream.

Children in a pre-linguistic age are already able to segment linguistic reality into objects³⁶ – which for Deskant, strictly speaking, would not be possible, given that, presumably, they do not possess the scheme of substance as permanence in time. The thesis I defend through the argument of affordance³⁷ is that we should start from the objects (an area in which, as I said, subjects are also included), so as to reduce the gap between our theories and our experience of the world. This is not meant to be a futile worship of objectivity (which is a property of knowledge, not of being), but a due recognition of the positivity on which we all rely, but upon which we rarely reflect.

And this does not only apply to physical experiences: the way in which beauty, or moral value or non-value come forward is clearly something that comes from outside of us, surprising and striking us. And it has value first of all *because* it comes from outside: otherwise it would be nothing but imagination.

Psychologische Forschung, 7, (1926), 294–329. Fichte already spoke of an “*Aufforderungscharakter*” of the real, see J. G. Fichte, *Grundlage des Naturrechts* (“Zweiter Lehrsatz”) (1796), ch. 1, § 3, *Gesamtausgabe der bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, Frommann-Holzboog, I/3, 342–351.

35 M. Ferraris, “New Realism as Positive Realism”, *META. Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology and Practical Philosophy*, Special Issue on New Realism, (2014), 172–213.

36 C.E. von Hofen ed E.S. Spelke, “Object Perception and Object-directed Reaching in Infancy”, in *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 114 (1985), 198–211.

37 I have extensively dwelt on this in my *Documentality*.

That is why, contrary to what is often said, one cannot distinguish the value from the fact: trivially, this is because the fact is itself a value, and the highest one, i.e. positivity,³⁸ which in turn is the condition of possibility of each value.

We can better understand this by means of the **experiment of the ethical brain**, which is a variation of the *Gedankenexperiment* of the brain in a vat.³⁹ The idea is this: imagine that a mad scientist has put some brains in a vat and is feeding them artificially. By means of electrical stimulation, these brains have the impression of living in a real world, but in fact what they feel is the result of simple electrical stimulations. Imagine that those stimulations depict situations that require moral stances: some snitch and some sacrifice themselves for freedom, some commit embezzlement and some commit acts of holiness. Can we really say that in those circumstances there are moral acts? In my opinion, we cannot: these are, in the best case scenario, representations with moral content. Without the positivity of objects, no morality is possible.

Everything, including corporations, symbolist poems and categorical imperatives, has its origin in the affordance offered by the **environment**. A cave has affordances for different types of beings and serves as a shelter because it has certain characteristics and not others. Ecosystems, state organizations, interpersonal relationships: in each of these infinitely more complex structures we find the same structure of resistance and affordance. I define “environment” every sphere in which these interactions take place, from an ecological niche to the social world – of course, each with its own characteristics. In an environment sense “is given”: it is not at our disposal. The sense is a mode of organization for which something occurs in a given way. But, in fact, it does not ultimately depend on subjects.

It is with this regard that I believe we should set against Markus Gabriel’s thesis “To exist is to exist in a field of sense”

38 See H. Rickert, *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis* (Tübingen: J. B. C. Mohr, 1915).

39 H. Putnam, “Brains in a vat”, in *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–22.

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the thesis “To exist is to resist in an environment”,⁴⁰ The notion of “field of sense”, as it is brilliantly defined by Gabriel, risks making existence depend on the possession of a sense. Now, an event or an object – from the Holocaust to Kafka’s Odradek – can seem to be utterly senseless, but this does not mean that the event did not take place or that the object does not exist. The fact that more often than we wish we find ourselves unable to find any meaning in our lives does not mean that we are not existing. The perspective suggested by “To exist is to exist in an environment”, instead, is that of a structurally opaque existence that manifests itself first of all in its persistence and possibly in its acting in an environment, without further qualifications. In other words, the field of sense is in the environment and not in the head; it is in the affordance and not in the concepts. Obviously, starting from the objects and from the opacity of existence involves being aware that there can never be a full totality, and rather that our relationship with the world is a confusing balance between ontology and epistemology.⁴¹ This, however, does not mean that the positivity of objects is precluded to us. Indeed, it is this very positivity that allows us to dwell in the world despite the fact that our notions are rarely clear and distinct.

It is in this environment that the **emergence** of thought from being occurs; such a process can be regarded as the development of an (intelligent) epistemology on the basis of an unintelligent ontology, a competence that precedes comprehension.⁴² If the thesis of constructivism is that a disembodied mind constitutes the real, here we have a sharp reversal: thought arises on the ground of reality, being a highly

40 See M. Gabriel, *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt* (Ullstein Verlag: Berlin, 2013).

41 As posited by Tim Button in *The Limits of Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), we have to locate ourselves between external realism (ontology) and internal realism (epistemology), but we do not know at what exact point. If we knew, I believe we would be dealing with absolute knowledge.

42 See D.C. Dennett, “Darwin’s ‘strange inversion of reasoning’”, in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 106 Suppl. 1 (2009), 10061–10065.

specialized product of evolution. This circumstance explains why epistemology could successfully relate to ontology, as the history of science proves. Hence the thesis of the dependence (of which we have already spoken) and, furthermore, of the **derivation** of epistemology from ontology. All the essential differences that govern our thinking – and that we tend to forget in thought, even though they guide our practices – are derived from the real, and not from thought: think of the differences between ontology and epistemology, experience and science, the external world and the internal world, objects and events, facts and fiction.

So, *metaphysical realism* (if we grant that such a position ever really existed as it is represented by antirealists) supposes a full mirroring of thought and reality:

(1) Thought \leftrightarrow Reality

Constructivism, finding this relation between two distinct realities incomprehensible, suggests a constitutive role of thought with respect to reality:

(2) Thought \rightarrow Reality

Positive realism, instead, sees thought as an emerging datum of reality, just like gravity, photosynthesis and digestion.

(3) Thought \leftarrow Reality

At this point it becomes possible to articulate the characteristics of the environment. We need to begin by introducing, next to the categories of **natural objects** (which exist in space and time independently of subjects) and **ideal objects** (which exist outside of space and time, independently of subjects), two new categories: that of **artifacts**, which exist in space and time depending on the subjects for their genesis, and that of **social objects**, which exist in space and time depending on

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the subjects for their genesis *and* their persistence.⁴³ From this point of view, it is entirely legitimate to assert that the stock market or democracy are representationally dependent (I will soon try to clarify this term since, as we have seen, it is rather obscure) on our collective beliefs. But this does not mean in any way that dinosaurs have some degree of dependence with respect to our collective beliefs. If anything, dependence concerns professorships in paleontology. But professorships in paleontology do not make dinosaurs exist, while the statements of rating agencies do increase or decrease the credit spread.

In this sense I claim, with a form of **contextualism**, that one is never fully realistic nor antirealists. There are spheres of being that can be more or less close 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 begin with natural objects. For Deskant, they are the phenomena *par excellence*: they are situated in space and time, and yet they are not to be found in nature. They are in our heads, along with the categories we use to give order to the world, to the point that, without human beings, space and time may disappear as well. It should follow that before people there were no objects, at least not as we know them, but clearly (as we have seen) it is not so.

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 depend on conceptual schemes, then it should obviously follow that they are phenomena. But it is not so. In order to be a phenomenon, it is not enough to depend on conceptual schemes. A phenomenon must also be in contrast with things in themselves. Let us consider a fine. What would be its “in itself”? To say that a fine is an apparent fine is to simply say that it is not a fine. Above all, people are things in themselves, while

43 See *Documentality*, and M. Ferraris, “Diversity of Social Objects. Outlines of a Theory”, in *Human Diversity and the Law*, ed. by M. Bussani e M. Graziadei (Brussels-Berne-Athens: Stämpfli-Bruyland-Sakkoulas, 2005), 135-178.

in Deskan't's view they would turn into ghosts or shadowy projections of thought.

And now let us come to events, things like hurricanes or car accidents. Which are often unpredictable. Irregularity, what disregards our data and expectations, is the clearest demonstration of the fact that the world is much more extensive and unpredictable than our thinking.

Documentality

There is one last move made by New Realism on which I would like to draw your attention; it regards realism about social objects. A theory of mind-dependence will always have intrinsically obscure aspects because it does not entail a simple causal dependence. For social objects to exist, it is necessary that there are at least two minds and normally, in complex phenomena, there are many more. In such complex cases, many minds do not think in any way about the object and yet they interfere with the process, while many others do think about it and yet are unable to successfully interfere with it (think of a financial crisis, or a war). Apparently, we are dealing with a puzzle: social objects, as we have seen, are **dependent on the mind**, but they are **independent of knowledge** (i.e. even of consciousness). A marriage that nobody knows anything about did still take place; in the same way, there may be a recession even though no one suspects it.

How is this possible? Does this not mean to argue that social objects are both dependent on, and independent of, the mind? No, it does not. The contradiction would present itself only if "mind dependence" were understood as dependence on *one* mind, as if anyone could determine the course of the social world. But this assumption is contradicted by any experience of the social world (my mind does not make the laws, nor the prices, at most it can write this article), as well as by the fact that in many circumstances our own mind seems to be independent of itself, such as when we develop obsessive thoughts that we would rather not have.

Even though we no longer have a contradiction between

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“dependence on the mind” and “independence from knowledge”, we still have to explain how social objects can persist even when we do not have consciousness or knowledge of them. That is why I argue that the foundation of the social environment is what I proposed we call **documentality**.⁴⁴ Documentality is the whole of the documents and recordings⁴⁵ that fill up our lives, not the sum of individual and collective intentionalities. In fact, when dealing with social objects we are not dealing with a series of intentionalities that consciously keep the object alive, so to speak, as if we all thought at the same time about the Constitution. It is not so: the Constitution is written, and at this point it is valid even if no one thinks about it (which in fact happens all too often).

Thus, from the perspective of documentality, the constitutive law of social objects is **object = inscribed act**. That is to say that a social object is the result of a social act (such as to involve at least two people, or a delegated machine and a person) that is characterized by being recorded, on a piece of paper, on a computer file, or even only in the minds of the people involved in the act. Once recorded, the social object, dependent on minds as to its genesis, becomes independent as to its existence – the same thing happens in the case of artifacts, with the only important difference that an artifact can offer its affordance even in the absence of minds (a table can be a shelter for an animal), while a document cannot.

44 In addition to the aforementioned *Documentality*, I refer the reader back to M. Ferraris, “Documentality Or why nothing social exists beyond the text”, in Christian Kanzian, Edmund Runggaldier (eds.) *Cultures. Conflict - Analysis - Dialogue, Proceedings of the 29th International Ludwig Wittgenstein-Symposium in Kirchberg, Austria*, Publications of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, New Series 3, (2007), 385–401; M. Ferraris “Documentality, or Europe”, *The Monist* 92:2, (2009), pp. 286–314, and M. Ferraris “Social ontology and documentality”, in Riccardo Pozzo and Marco Sgarbi (eds.) *Eine Typologie der Formen der Begriffsgeschichte*, Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte, Sonderheft 7 (2010), 133–148.

45 M. Ferraris, “Science of Recording”, in Herbert Hrachovec, Alois Pichler (eds.) *Philosophy of the Information Society*, Proceedings of the 30th International Ludwig Wittgenstein-Symposium in Kirchberg 2007, Frankfurt/M, Ontos Verlag, (2008), 110–123.

The fact that the meaning is not in the head, but in the world⁴⁶ is well illustrated, in my opinion, precisely by the relationship between affordance and documentality.

In addition to solving the puzzle of mind-dependence and independence from consciousness, documentality also allows us to provide a more solid basis for the constitutive rule proposed by the most influential theorist of social objects, John Searle: namely the rule “X counts as Y in C” (the physical object X counts as the social object Y in the context C).⁴⁷ The limit of such proposal is twofold. On the one hand, it does not seem able to account for complex social objects (such as businesses) or negative entities (such as debts, in which case it seems difficult to find a corresponding physical object). On the other hand, it makes the entire social reality depend on the action of a completely mysterious entity (as opposed to documents), that is, collective intentionality, which allegedly manages the transformation of the physical into the social.

According to the version that I propose, on the contrary, it is very easy to account for the totality of social objects, from informal promises to businesses and even negative entities such as debts. In all these cases there is a minimal structure, which is guaranteed by the presence of at least two people who commit an act (which may consist of a gesture, a word, or writing) that can be recorded on some support, even if it were only human memory. In addition to accounting for the physical basis of the social object – which is not an X available for the action of collective intentionality, but a recording that can take place in multiple ways – the rule that I propose (and which I call the “rule of documentality” as opposed to the “rule of intentionality”) has the advantage of not making social reality depend on a function, i.e. collective intentionality. In fact, such function is dangerously close to a purely mental process: this led Searle to make a statement that is anything but realistic, namely that the economic crisis is

46 See H. Putnam, “The meaning of ‘meaning’”, 227.

47 J. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

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largely the result of imagination.⁴⁸ From my perspective, on the contrary, since this is a form of documentality, money is anything but imaginary, and this circumstance allows us to draw a distinction between the social (what records the acts of at least two people, even if the recording takes place in the minds of those people and not on external documents) and the mental (which can take place only in the mind of a single person).

One last consideration about **hermeneutics**,⁴⁹ which postmodernism rather weirdly has claimed the monopoly of. By this I do not at all mean to argue that there are no interpretations in the social world. But the first and fundamental interpretation consists in discerning between what can be interpreted and what cannot be interpreted, what links exist between ontology and epistemology and what is the relevance of the latter with regard to natural, social and ideal objects. In the social world, epistemology undoubtedly matters to a great extent because it is **constitutive** with respect to ontology (whereas, in the natural world, it is only **reconstructive**: it finds something that exists independently of epistemology); what we think, what we say, our interactions are all crucial, and it is crucial that these interactions are recorded and documented. This is why the social world is full of documents: in archives, in our drawers, in our wallets, and now even in our mobile phones.⁵⁰

Thus it becomes possible to assign the realist intuition and the constructivist one each to their sphere of competence.

48 “It is, for example, 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.” J. Searle, *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, New York, Oxford University Press 2010, p. 201.

49 On this topic, see M. Ferraris, “A New Realist Approach to Hermeneutics”, in *Phainomena* (Ljubljana), *Selected Essays in Contemporary Italian Philosophy*, XXI, 82-83, November 2012, pp. 67-83.

50 M. Ferraris, *Where are you? Ontology of the Mobile Phone*, New York, Fordham UP 2014. See also “Where are you? Mobile ontology”, in *Mobile Understanding. The Epistemology of Ubiquitous Communication*, ed by di K. Nyiri, Vienna, Passagen Verlag 2006, pp. 41-52.

1. Natural objects are independent of epistemology and make natural science true. 2. Ontology is independent of epistemology. 3. Social objects are dependent on epistemology, without being subjective. 4. “Intuitions without concepts are blind” applies primarily to social objects (where it has a constructive value), and less to the epistemological approach to the natural world (where it has a reconstructive value).⁵¹ 5. The realist intuition and the constructionist intuition have therefore equal legitimacy in their respective fields of application.

My final thesis is that that **intentionality derives from documentality**. Postmodern thinkers much insisted on the fact that the subject should not be considered as a fundamental datum, but their position usually did not go much beyond the criticism of the “Cartesian subject” and the mere hypothesis that the subject is conditioned by culture. I believe the prospect of documentality provides the basis for a positive development. It begins with the theory that – from its ancient to its modern supporters – conceives of the mind as a tabula on which to lay inscriptions. In fact, as we have seen, there is a powerful action of inscriptions in social reality: social behaviours are determined by laws, rituals and norms; social structures and education form our intentions.

Imagine an Arche-Robinson Crusoe as the first and last man on the face of the earth. Could he really be devoured by the ambition to become an admiral, a billionaire or a court poet? Certainly not, just as he could not sensibly aspire to follow trends, or to collect baseball cards or still lives. And if, say, he tried to produce a document, he would be undertaking an impossible task, because to make a document there must be at least two people, the writer and the reader. In fact, our Arche-Robinson would not even have a language, and one could hardly say that he would “think” in the usual sense of the term.⁵² And it would seem difficult to argue that he was

51 M. Ferraris, “Kant and Social Objects”, in Kant und die Aufklaerung, ed by Luigi Cataldi Madonna and Paola Rumore, Hildesheim – Zuerich – New York, Georg Olms Verlag 2011, pp. 229-237.

52 In agreement with the argument against private language proposed by Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*, paragraphs 243-421). There

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proud, arrogant or in love, for roughly the same reason why it would be absurd to pretend he had friends or enemies.

We thus have two circumstances that reveal the social structure of the mind. On the one hand, the mind cannot arise unless it is immersed in the social, made up of education, language, communication and recording of behaviours. On the other hand, there is the huge category of social objects. Rather than sketching a world at the subject's total disposal, the sphere of social objects reveals the inconsistency of solipsism: the fact that in the world there are also others in addition to us is proven by the existence of these objects, which would not have a *raison d'être* in a world where there was only one subject. If it was not possible to keep traces, there would be no mind, and it is not by chance that the mind was traditionally depicted as a *tabula rasa*, a support on which impressions and thoughts are inscribed. But without the possibility of inscription there would not even be social objects, which consist precisely in the recording of social acts, starting from the fundamental one of the promise. And, if this is the case, perhaps we should translate Aristotle's sentence that man is a *zoon logon echon* as: man is an animal endowed with inscriptions, or rather (since one of the meanings of *logos* in Greek is "promise", "given word") as "man is an animal that promises."⁵³

must be at least two people not only to produce a document, but also to have a language.

53 "To breed an animal *with the right to make promises* - is not this the paradoxical task that nature has set itself in the case of man?" F. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 57.