OXFORD

Transcendental Realism

Maurizio Ferraris*

ABSTRACT

I will defend three theses. First that antirealism—from Kant to postmodernism—stems from the confusion between ontology (what there is) and epistemology (the way in which we know or represent what there is). Second that this antirealism is a form of transcendental idealism, because it takes epistemology as the condition of the possibility of ontology. And third that the new realism (post-postmodern realism) is both a metaphysical realism, because it takes ontology to be independent of epistemology (what I call "negative realism"), and a transcendental realism, because it considers ontology the condition of the possibility of epistemology (what I call "positive realism").

I. TRANSCENDENTAL IDEALISM

First I propose to show that between post-Kantian idealism and postmodern idealism there is only a difference of degree. In fact, both can be traced back to the same root, since both postulate that ontology depends on epistemology. The former asserts that ontology depends on epistemology through a causal chain and is therefore discredited by science. The latter, in contrast, relies on a pseudodependence, which one might call "cultural": it passes off as ontology what is actually an axiology linked to the importance of certain cultural values in the human world.

Construction

Constructivism is the view according to which we can have certain knowledge about the outside world only if we can generalize the construction processes by means of which geometry derives theorems (i.e., knowledge that is actual and, being deductive, certain) from axioms.[1] Note that on this view both our knowledge of geometry and geometrical objects themselves are constructed through one and the same process. This idea underlies the thesis that prior to any empirical knowledge we have certain *a priori* principles that make possible both our *knowledge* of external reality and the very *existence* of the objects of that knowledge.[2]

Obviously arguments for this thesis can be articulated in many ways, which I will examine in detail. However, all of them are variations of transcendentalism and all follow from the latter's constitutive misunderstanding, otherwise known as the

*University of Turin

"transcendental fallacy": the confusion between ontology (what there is) and episte-
mology (what we know, or think we know).[3]

This is a very natural confusion, something very similar to the "stimulus error," in
which someone, after closing his eyes and being asked, What do you see?, says:
"nothing." The truth is that he is seeing phosphenes, consecutive images, and so on.
The subject is not giving a description, but rather proposing a naïve theory of vision:
that the eye is like a camera, so that, when the lens is closed, nothing comes through.
The *boutade* that Ramses II did not die of TB because Koch identified the tuberculo-
sis bacillus only in 1882 is nothing more than a magnified version of this error.

As I said, it is very natural to confuse ontology and epistemology. However, if one
considers the metaphysical implications of this fallacy, one will notice that it implies
blind faith in (or rather an uninvestigated presupposition about) the existence of the
mind or spirit (or of conscious subjects or processes of thinking) as something inde-
pendent of matter, capable of producing representations and, through them, things.
It is for this reason that—as I will try to demonstrate below—the representational
idealism of Rorty *et frères* is a contemporary revival of transcendental idealism. The
only difference is that it is less audacious than its predecessors (since unlike transcen-
dental idealism it does not refer to natural reality at all) and so is seemingly uninter-
ested in the true metaphysical implications of its assumptions.

Argument from Correlation

The premise of constructivism is what I propose to call the "argument from correla-
tion": objects exist only in correlation with their subjects. This argument, which
makes the existence of objects depend on their thinkability or perceptibility by a sub-
ject, is the basis of that fundamental character of modern philosophy that has been
called "correlationism."[4]

It has been said that correlationism is not capable of accounting for a reality that
pre-exists the subject. But a radical correlationist could claim that God created us,
with all our memories, just a few seconds ago. In my view, it is more important that
correlationism is unable to respond to the objection of solipsism. In fact, if correla-
tionism were true, we would have at least as many mental worlds as there are sub-
jects, and the passage from one mental world to another would be inexplicable. *De
facto*, the world of correlationism is made up of just one single monad: a subject rep-
resenting objects within itself. This, ultimately, is the world represented by Kant in
his refutation of idealism (which, coincidentally, proves that Kant's view, despite his
realist intentions, is also a variant of transcendental idealism).

Thus, as I will argue below, the fundamental obstacle to correlationism lies not in
pre-existence, but rather in interobservation[5] and interrelation—in other words, in
the fact that different subjects can observe the same object; different objects, humans
and other living things, can interact in the same space. To explain these circum-
stances by means of correlationism, one would have to invoke some kind of pre-es-
tablished harmony among all those correlations and this, as we shall see, is a forceful
argument in favor of transcendental realism. For now, however, I will not develop
the positive implications of this point but merely draw out its negative consequences
for correlationism. Since a correlationist cannot think that interaction is made

possible by properties of both objects and (animal and human) subjects existing independently of this interaction, she has to claim that interaction is made possible by the *subjects*, or rather, by the single *subject*, alone.

In this sense correlationism evolves logically into constructivism. It implies not merely that objects are *known* only in correlation with the subject, but further that objects are somehow *constructed by* the subject. In fact, if correlation does not imply the construction of objects in this way, then the fundamental thesis of correlationism is nothing more than a tautology: when I see the screen of this computer, my knowledge of the screen somehow depends on me (epistemological dependence). If correlationism wants to say something significant, then it has to turn itself into a constructivism of the form: when I see this screen, the existence of the screen somehow depends on me (ontological dependence).[6]

Constructivism

The fundamental thesis of constructivism is:

> it is a necessary condition of the existence of X that X is constructed by a subject.

Saying that the external world is constructed by the subject means claiming that it depends on the subject (or, still more problematically, on a plurality of subjects). If correlationism is forced to transform correlation into dependence, then constructivism is forced to clarify what this dependence is and to specify how strong it is, and on this point the three alternatives from which we can choose are, by increasing weakness, causal, conceptual and representational dependence.

Causal dependence

Causal dependence is an ontological dependence for which:

> if X exists, then X is caused to exist by a subject, that is, this causality is a necessary condition for X to exist.

To my knowledge, the only philosopher who has actually supported this causal dependence thesis is the Italian neo-idealist Giovanni Gentile. Unlike Berkeley's idealism or its contemporary revival,[7] Gentile's philosophy posits that the cause of representations is not God but rather the finite knowing subject:

> Berkeley in the beginning of the Eighteenth century expressed very clearly the following concept. Reality is conceivable only in so far as the reality conceived is in relation to the activity which conceives it, and in that relation it is not only a possible object of knowledge, it is a present and actual one. To conceive reality is to conceive, at the same time and as one with it, the mind in which that reality is represented; *and therefore the concept of a material reality is absurd.*[8]

Let's analyze this sentence. It claims that: "Reality is conceivable only in so far as the reality conceived is in relation to the activity which conceives it." This is

tautological: in order to think, I have to think. Then, however, Gentile goes on to say that only in relation to the thinking subject can reality be "not only a possible object of knowledge" but "a present and actual one." Hence, with a perfect *non sequitur*, he arrives at the conclusion that "To conceive reality is to conceive, at the same time and as one with it, the mind in which that reality is represented." This is bizarre, because it assumes that only what is actually present to *my* thought is real—and thereby classifies as unreal anything that is not actually present to my thought (including, for example, the theory of causal dependence itself, as well as its inventor).

Gentile should not be underrated. He says openly what many postmodern philosophers, as we shall see, have said in a more convoluted way. However, if his (and their) theory were true, there would be openly absurd consequences. There would be no difference between introspection and knowledge of the external world. All things past, from dinosaurs to the Sumerians, would be present exactly like the thoughts that think of them. All things future would be no less present than all things past. Everything not present to some subject would be nonexistent; on the other hand, anything he thinks of, including Pegasus, would thereby exist, though only at the exact moment when he thinks of it.

Conceptual Dependence

To avoid the problems related to causal dependence, idealists sometimes speak instead of "conceptual dependence."

> It is a necessary condition for the existence of X that X is conceptualized by a subject.

This thesis is one of the possible outcomes of Kant's famous statement: "intuitions without concepts are blind." The latter, however, may be interpreted in two ways: (1) The weak form, for which without the concept of 'dinosaur' we would not *recognize* a dinosaur if we saw one. And (2) the strong form, for which without the concept of 'dinosaur' we would not *see* a dinosaur if we saw one. When it comes to defending Kant, it is usually said that he meant only (1): conceptuality is reconstructive of experience in general. But had he meant (1), his philosophy would have been only an epistemology and not an ontology aimed at securing not only the possibility, but also the objective certainty, of knowledge. The only way to counter skeptical objections convincingly is to hold that experience itself is constituted by concepts.

A defender of conceptual dependence thus faces an impasse. In fact, the strong (which is to say, ontological) version of conceptual dependence can be traced back to causal dependence and is subject to the same criticism: by positing that subjects create reality, it has the same absurd consequences as Gentile's theory. On the other hand, the weak (epistemological) version of conceptual dependence is not a real dependence at all, since it is trivially false to state that a Tyrannosaurus rex depends on our conceptual schemes, just as it is trivially true to state that *naming* such a creature "Tyrannosaurus rex" depends on our conceptual schemes.

It is also trivially true to argue that the term "Tyrannosaurus rex" is very useful for our knowledge of a Tyrannosaurus rex. But it is no less trivially true that if there is

one thing that Tyrannosaurus rex has never known it is that its name was "Tyrannosaurus rex"—something that did not prevent its having all the features of a Tyrannosaurus rex.

Representational dependence

This consideration suffices to confute the weak conceptual dependence that Rorty called "representational dependence. [9] This posits that:

> it is a necessary condition for the existence of X that X is represented by a subject.

Compared to conceptual dependence, representational dependence has the feature of being programmatically vague. While conceptual dependence claims that intuitions depend on concepts, representational dependence suggests that our vocabulary exercises a certain kind of influence over the external world. Notwithstanding this, the problems of conceptual dependence arise here once again. If "representational dependence" means simply that the name "dinosaur" depends on us, then it is a triviality. If it means that a dinosaur's *being* depends on us, then it faces a problem in giving an account of the fact that there were already dinosaurs when we were not yet there.

If we try to give concrete shape to representational dependence, we will realize that the technical term hides once again a conceptual confusion between ontology (what there is, which is independent of our representations) and epistemology (what we know, or think we know, which may very well depend on our representations, even if it is not representations that make statements true, but rather that reality to which the statements correspond).

Culturalism

But if, as we have seen, to avoid countersensical outcomes representational dependence has to be related merely to nomenclature, asserting merely that the names of the known objects depend on the knowing subjects, how can representationalists act as if this dependence were something nontrivial (as if it were an authentic kind of dependence)?

For this to happen it is necessary to radically redefine the task of philosophy so that it will be interested not in nature (on which, not by accident, philosophy has had little or nothing to say during the past two centuries)[10] but rather only in culture, regarding it as a "second nature."[11] It is manifest that at this point one can consider representational dependence to be an authentic dependence—indeed some phenomena seem to lead us precisely in this direction in regard to the social world, where changing vocabulary sometimes seems to coincide with changing reality (an idea encapsulated in Orwell's Newspeak).

I shall come back to this later. For now I will note only that this attitude is the underlying reason for the popularity of culturalism, whose fundamental assumption is:

> it is a necessary condition of the existence of X that X is culturally meaningful.

Philosophical catchphrases widespread in the continental arena such as "language is the house of being" (Heidegger); "being that can be understood is language"

(Gadamer); or "there is no outside-text" (Derrida) are nothing more than different formulations of this thesis.

However, there are also statements by analytical philosophers that can be traced back to culturalism, such as that one does not encounter perceptions but beliefs (Davidson), or that the world is constructed just like an artwork (Goodman), or again—and with an audacity approaching that of Derrida—"To be is to be the value of a bound variable" (Quine). In all these cases, one witnesses a form of *esse est concipi,* for which the language used to describe a portion of reality is mistaken for that reality itself. The map is mistaken for the territory.

Therefore both analytic and continental philosophers have resorted to culturalist arguments over the past fifty years. However, the fact that analytic culturalism was less successful than its continental (hermeneutic) counterpart depends on the circumstance that analytic culturalism was ontologically committed. Such commitment, though, was easy to refute: if someone says, for example, that constellations are the outcome of our conceptual schemes, then one can always answer, "Indeed, but stars are not." Hermeneutic culturalism, though defended axiological theses. To say that "language is the house of being," that "being that can be understood is language," and that "there is no outside-text" is to say *nothing more* than: language (and only language) is important—but it is to treat this axiological assertion *as if* it were a matter of ontology. And of course an axiological thesis can never be refuted by means of an ontological argument. If someone asked the hermeneutic culturalist, "Do you mean that stars are made of language?," she would probably reply, "How can you deny that language is important to our experience of the stars?"

Esse Est Concipi

When further expounded, this strategy typically manifests itself in the form of an assertion to the effect that the issue of realism or antirealism is "surpassed," or that one should look for a third position "beyond realism and antirealism."[12] Behind the scenes, however, there lurks a very strong implicit ontological commitment, which consists of one or other thesis along the lines of:

> there is not a subject and an object; there is only the relation between subject and object.

This, though, raises a crucial problem from the ontological point of view. For the only coherent way to defend (for example) the thesis that *the correlation between knowing and known* is *the only form of existence* (indeed, *esse est concipi*) means embracing an idealism that leaves no room for anything material, since evidently the *relation* takes place only in the mind. The difference between nineteenth and twentieth-century idealism is therefore much smaller than Rorty thought—there is just the added difficulty that the twentieth-century idealist is forced to embrace a naturalistic credo (when, for instance, he goes to the doctor and not to the shaman) while espousing an idealistic credo when writing philosophical essays. By claiming that the spirit (and its secularized version as "epistemology") is the condition of the possibility of ontology, culturalism turns out to be yet another form of transcendental idealism.

Back to Realism

Unlike idealism, the position I call transcendental realism[13] is very sensitive to the difference between observation and introspection. It states that the observer observes in the observed something different and independent of the observer. This thesis is *realist* in so far as it presupposes a reality (above all a material reality) other than knowledge, that is, a reality that does not depend on the subject in any of the ways I have illustrated above. And it is *transcendental* because it regards this reality as the condition of the possibility of knowledge: if knowledge did not refer to something other than the knowing subject, then words such as 'subject', 'object', 'externality', and 'ontology' would have no sense. For transcendental realism snow is white if and only if snow is white, and this is true regardless of whether we know how to formulate sentences such as "snow is white if and only if snow is white."

In fact, it is banal to observe that *knowledge of reality* is the result of a constructive process while it is on the other hand trivially false to say that *reality* is the result of a constructive process. Knowledge is knowledge of something different from, and independent of, knowledge, otherwise it is not knowledge. The epistemological question "How do we know what there is?" is an important question. But it is different from the ontological question, which is and remains: "What is there?"

Transcendental realism comprises two components, which I call *negative* and *positive* realism. The job of the former is to show the autonomy of ontology from epistemology (and therefore rests on a metaphysical argument); the job of the latter is to show how epistemology is to be derived from ontology (and therefore rests on a transcendental argument).

II. NEGATIVE REALISM

The underlying assumption of negative realism is that ontology is independent from epistemology. Of course an obvious objection could be made: when we encounter something, it is we that encounter it, so epistemology always intervenes. My answer is the following: our encounters notwithstanding, it is still a fact that meteorites caused the craters of the moon without any human being knowing about it or perceiving it; for that matter, I could be killed in my sleep by the ceiling falling down and my knowledge or perception would have no causal effect on this unfortunate event. This reveals the independence of ontology from epistemology. This independence is manifested as resistance (resistance against the action of my conceptual schemes and my perceptual apparatus—thus against my epistemological equipment). Therefore, the fundamental thesis of negative realism is:

ontology resists epistemology.

Resistance

The argument underlying the idea of "resistance" is this: if external reality (a significant part of ontology) were indeed the result of a constructive activity of the knowing subject (a significant part of epistemology), then there would be no reason to ever encounter resistance in our experience of external reality. If, therefore, we do encounter such resistance, then there are good reasons to think that external reality is

not constructed by the knowing subject. Here I will indicate three variants of resistance to show that it is a ubiquitous element in our ordinary life.

i. *Surprise*. Whatever does not meet my expectations—while being much rarer than regularities—is hard to justify in the absence of an external world (however you wish to qualify it).

ii. *Opacity*. A world depending on our conceptual schemes leaves unexplained the opacity of our knowledge, the frustrations involved in so many of our experiences, the vanity and tenacity of so many of our hopes.

iii. *Irrevocability*. The fact that today I do not encounter dinosaurs does not mean that dinosaurs never existed: dinosaurs once roamed the earth, just as the Shoah occurred. To make dinosaurs depend on our thought is the first step to a historical revisionism of a type that can also involve the loss of meaning of a good part of our history.

Argument from Unamendability

As we have seen, if transcendental idealism rests on the argument from correlation for which objects exist only in correlation with their subjects, negative realism insists on the resistance of objects. If objects (or at least a good part of them) resist subjects, it means that such correlation as exists between subjects and objects does not entail that the latter causally depend on the former: it is not a case of ontological dependence. Based on this consideration, I propose to criticize the argument from correlation by means of the argument from unamendability.

The latter can be articulated as follows:

i. The argument from correlation states that objects exist only in correlation with their subjects.

ii. In order for this correlation to entail a real dependence of the object on the subject, it is necessary (as asserted by Gentile) that the subject construct the object by means of thought.

iii. But we have considerable evidence of the fact that we cannot amend objects by the mere force of thought.

iv. Therefore it is false that objects causally depend on their subjects.

Given that causal dependence is the only nontrivial type of dependence, and given that representational dependence and cultural dependence are pseudodependences, the argument from unamendability demonstrates that the argument from correlation is unsound.

The argument from unamendability plays an essential role in the realist strategy. For otherwise the correlationist, when faced with the thesis that *ontology resists epistemology,* might object that, when *I* experience the resistance of a given object, then *I* am the one who is doing the experiencing, and therefore the argument from correlation is still sound. At this point, however, the realist can ask of the correlationist that he amend the object by means of some act of knowledge. The correlationist will certainly fail in this task, just as he would fail if he attempted to *see* the duck and the

rabbit in Jastrow's figure *at the same time* by appealing to his knowledge that the two figures are copresent. We cannot amend external reality through knowledge; we cannot even amend perception through knowledge. And this unamendability reaches up to the social world: I cannot cancel a debt or make a promise by the mere use of thought.

The argument from unamendability is undoubtedly a negative argument (which is why I have placed it at the basis of negative realism). But I wish to emphasize that it also has a positive implication. Popper has rightly brought our attention to the role of falsification in science: a single black swan is enough to falsify the proposition "all swans are white." This fact illustrates the role of unamendability in the formation of true propositions. What is known is independent of the knower and ontology is independent of epistemology: a black swan will never turn white by virtue of someone's holding the thesis that all swans are white.

So, unlike epistemology, which can always be corrected and improved, ontology is unamendable. From the ontological point of view, resistance thus manifests itself as unamendability: things cannot be corrected or transformed by means of representations. I may or may not know that water is H_2O; I will get wet anyway, and I will not be able to dry myself out by appealing to the thought that hydrogen and oxygen as such are not wet. This unamendability allows us (negatively) to acknowledge all the essential differences that are neglected by representational idealism: between *experience and science, reality and truth, external and internal*, and between *objects which are intrinsically of different types*.

Experience and Science

Ontology and epistemology as theoretical endeavors are amendable. When seen as subject-matters however—thus: as being or reality on the one hand, and as our body of knowledge-and-beliefs, on the other—they behave differently. Only the latter is amendable, as the body of beliefs-that-are-not-knowledge gradually (we hope) shrinks with time, while ontology stays unchanged—and it *has to* stay unchanged, because knowledge is knowledge of something that does not depend on what is known. This difference applies to all forms of knowledge, including the knowledge that pertains to our everyday experiences, but it becomes especially evident in the case of scientific research because of the special features of the latter, including:

1. The crucial role played by *language* in science in virtue of the fact that the latter is an inherently social phenomenon seems hardly contestable. "Publish or perish" is perhaps an academic aberration when applied to individual researchers, but it is a categorical imperative when applied to science as a whole, since as a collective and cumulative endeavor science necessarily requires not only discovery but also communicative exchange and storage.

2. The intrinsic *historicity* of science, which then follows as a corollary. Science exists precisely insofar as each generation can capitalize on the discoveries made by previous generations; ordinary experience, in contrast, can very well exist outside of historicity in this sense of the term.

3. Science rests further on *freedom* in the sense that science is a deliberate activity. At some point in the intellectual history of certain civilizations, scientific activities began and then evolved freely, even if in many cases responding to the pressure of practical needs. This genesis *might not have taken place*, as is proved by the fact that there are civilizations that have not witnessed the development of science, while in others science has developed in ways significantly different from our own. Experience, instead (apart from when it serves science, such as when looking into a microscope) is not essentially deliberate: we are slothful or animated, hungry or thirsty, anxious or depressed, without our deciding to be so.

4. Science is marked by the factor of *infinity*, as is seen in the fact that the most prestigious sciences are those that have a long history and a long future ahead of them. None of this can be said of ordinary experience, which not only is not regarded as infinite (its period, in any case, cannot be longer than that of a human life) but is also not conceived as a cumulative endeavor.

5. Finally, there is the factor of *teleology*, where the point is very simple: science is a deliberate activity, experience simply happens.

Reality and Truth

The second difference made possible by negative realism is that between reality and truth. The strategy of the transcendental idealist is correlationist also with regard to truth. Claiming that "there are not *subject* and *object*; there is only *the relation between the two*" amounts to asserting that reality is equal to knowledge. The negative realist, instead, insists on a crucial asymmetry: it is a banality to say that knowledge depends on reality; but it is a simple falsehood to say that reality depends on knowledge. Thus it is true that Ramses II died of TB regardless of whether Koch isolated the bacillus, whether the doctors at Val de Grace found traces of the bacillus in Ramses's mummy, and whether Bruno Latour denied that Ramses II died of tuberculosis.

External and Internal

The third difference implied by negative realism is that between the external and the internal. Realism is bound to the problem of the existence of the external world,[14] because without a world external to the subject the very notion of reality would likely not be conceivable, and whole parts of our vocabulary and our ordinary experience (starting from the very idea of "knowledge") would be meaningless.[15] For instance, there would be no way of distinguishing between perception and hallucination; also, in the absence of this notion, expressions like "in London" or "yesterday morning" would have no sense. Furthermore it would become hard to speak of "laws of nature," and the whole idea of science would become problematic. Finally, without the postulation of an external world it would be hard to give an account of the whole set of actions we call "history," which presuppose the identification of places in a shared space and a succession of times.

In my view, by "external world" one should mean not a physical-natural aggregation but rather the sphere of all that is unamendable in the ways explained above. In this sense, even thoughts—once externalized—are part of the external world. I am the constructor of some of my thoughts in the basic sense that these thoughts would not be there if I were not there. However, the moment my thought is communicated or written down it becomes part of the external world. It follows that the external world is the field of unamendability.

Types of Objects

Based on this characterization of the external world, I will now list the objects of which it is formed.[16]

Natural objects, which exist in space and time independently of any subject's representations and which include also subjects as natural beings.

Ideal objects, which exist outside of space and time independently of the subjects' representations. They include, for instance, the number 2 and universals like twoness.

Artifacts, which exist in space and time in a way that is dependent on our conceptual schemes (designs, goals) and on our deliberate acts for their coming into being, but not for their being maintained in being.

Social objects, which exist in space in time in a way that is dependent on our representations.

Note that "dependent on" does not mean "caused by." In my perspective,[17] we have in the realm of social objects a constitutive rule to the effect that the object exists because there is a recorded act. That is to say that the social object is the result of an act that involves at least two actors and has the characteristic of being recorded on some surface. The object depends on its recording (a contract that leaves no traces ceases to exist), but it is not caused thereby.

As we shall see, this dependence of social objects on recording plays an important role in positive realism, since it proves that, in addition to being inapplicable to the natural world, transcendental idealism (the thesis of the dependence of objects on their subjects) is also inapplicable to the ontology of social reality.

III. POSITIVE REALISM

Under the heading of "negative realism" I have shown that natural objects, ideal objects, and artifacts are independent of our representations but that social objects are dependent on our representations. I have therefore demonstrated the fundamental thesis of negative realism, i.e., that ontology is independent of epistemology. In this third part, I will articulate the fundamental thesis of positive realism, namely that

epistemology emerges from ontology.

Emergence

If construction is the cornerstone of transcendental idealism and resistance is the fundamental element of negative realism, then emergence is the basic characteristic

of positive realism. Negative realism shows the independence of ontology from epistemology; positive realism shows the dependence of epistemology on ontology.

Positive realism is all about overturning the Copernican Revolution. The answer to the question "How must objects be made in order to be known by us?" is not that knowledge is made possible by a system of conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatuses mediating our relation to the world. Rather, knowledge is made possible by the autonomous features of the objects and agents in the world. This insight yields a form of emergentism that sees ontology as the condition of the possibility of epistemology.

Emergentism as here conceived sees thought as something real that emerges from processes in the organism just as photosynthesis and digestion do.[18] These are not heterogeneous entities, but rather one reality in which epistemology is built up on the basis of ontology. In this framework, Darwin's hypothesis is more than sufficient to explain phenomena such as conscience, knowledge, and values as emerging from a set of biological contingencies. Evolution could, certainly, have proceeded differently, and a slight climatic variation might have made the *Critique of Pure Reason* impossible. But it would be very hard to claim that the a priori principles expounded in the *Critique of Pure Reason* are what made possible a world of the type appropriate to allowing its existence.

Argument from Interaction

Now, an obvious objection could be made: How do you prove that the world is organized independently of our representations, given that we know it only through our representations? The answer is simple, and consists of what I propose to call the "argument from interaction." One of our most common experiences is to interact with other beings—cats, dogs, flies, viruses, plants, and inanimate beings—differing more or less radically in the conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatuses with which they are (or in some cases are not) endowed. If such interaction itself *depended on conceptual schemes*, then this simple empirical fact would appear to be miraculous.[19] For interaction between beings with very different conceptual schemes (and perceptual apparatuses, granularities of experience and forms of life) is a very common experience.

The argument from interaction runs parallel to that from unamendability but in the positive direction. If unamendability allowed us to draw a number of differences (between ontology and epistemology, reality and truth, external world and internal world, and between types of objects), interaction is the first step in the process by which epistemology emerges from ontology.

Environment

The environment is where interactions between living beings and objects take place—where subjects are but one kind of living being.[20] The choice of the term "environment" (rather than "world" or "cosmos") is due to the fact that, as was rightly noted, the most appropriate space for ontology that can do justice also to the phenomena of perception and action is an ecological space.[21]

The environment is not an amorphous platonic *chora*. It is a structured space offering affordances[22]—invitations that belong not to concepts but rather to objects in the world. Pragmatism had the merit of insisting on the fact that our relation to the world is not only cognitive but also entails action—the subject does not merely contemplate, he also uses resources, seeks solutions, transforms situations. However, if this action is possible, it is because reality *allows* and indeed *invites us to engage with it*.

First of all, the objects in reality are largely autonomous—something that is highly underestimated by constructivism, which takes these objects as (reflections of) a docile colony of conceptual schemes.[23] Children in the prelinguistic stage of development are already able to segment reality into objects—which for Kant should be impossible, given that, presumably, they do not possess the scheme of substance as permanence in time.

Secondly, objects manifest a direction of use and offer opportunities for action that are *given*,[24] *directly perceived*,[25] and not merely *thought of*. Recalling Wittgenstein's view of language as a toolbox, we can affirm that an object's affordances are in some ways analogous to linguistic meaning. A handle invites one to handle it and this property is not in the subject but in the object. We may not want it, we may not think of it, but that's how it is: the initiative lies in the invitation coming from the object, which is not a docile and amorphous cookie dough to be shaped by conceptual stamps, but a set of quantities, forms, properties and, most of all, possibilities inviting action.

Construction and Dependence

But now we need to prove the efficaciousness of emergence not only in natural but also in social reality. In contemporary social ontology, the most renowned thesis on the passage from the natural to the social is that proposed by John Searle:

> [There is a] continuous line that goes from molecules and mountains to screwdrivers, levers, and beautiful sunsets, and then to legislatures, money, and nation-states. The central span on the bridge from physics to society is collective intentionality, and the decisive movement on that bridge in the creation of social reality is the collective intentional imposition of function on entities that cannot perform these functions without that imposition.[26]

The task that Searle attributes to collective intentionality is very challenging, and there are good reasons to believe that his hypothesis does not work.[27] In fact his view seems to reconceive the old idea of the social contract: people already endowed with consciousness and a shared collective intentionality (what Rousseau would have called *volonté générale*) decide to impose social functions upon natural objects or artifacts that will maintain their new status as long as collective intentionality so wishes. It is not hard to see that, despite his professed naturalism, Searle is a transcendental idealist when it comes to the social world, because his thesis makes social reality depend on subjects in another form of constructivism.

> 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. (Searle 2010, 201)

There is no doubt that it is wrong to treat money like viruses or molecules. But this does not entail that money is the product of fantasy (which in this passage is another term for collective intentionality).

Positive realism, in contrast, differentiates between the socially dependent and the socially constructed. Small portions of social reality are socially constructed: for example, the laws of the United States of America or the price of beer in Parisian bars. However, the fact that laws or prices are the product of social construction does not mean that they depend on fantasy. Laws and prices have to be written down somewhere, and from that moment their existence no longer depends on the intentions of the constructor but on the fact of their being recorded and therefore made permanent, publicly accessible, and textually unchangeable. In other words they become a part of the external world just like tables, chairs, and mountains. Of course they can be amended, but then through other laws and prices that in turn will have to be written down, not by means of mere fantasy or intentionality.

It is also worth noting that the greater part of social reality is not socially constructed but socially dependent: patriarchy, slavery, subordination, and charisma would never have existed without human beings, but it is difficult to imagine two people *inventing* patriarchy or slavery. It is much easier to picture people *criticizing* patriarchy or slavery (criticism which then turns into the social construction of new, alternative institutions). To put it differently, there are very important parts (probably the most important parts) of society that are rooted in our animal past and therefore were already phylogenetically formed and ready when our process of hominization began to be refined.

Also, at the ontogenetic level, our relationship with social reality is not one in which we are constructors but rather passive receptors. In the greater part of our social life we follow the rules blindly without even perceiving them as rules (which is why intercultural conflicts may arise as the implicit assumptions of respective social worlds make themselves felt). Of course, once again, it is possible and even right and proper to criticize the rules. But the fact that rules can be criticized means neither that they are constructed nor *a fortiorissimo* that we have constructed them.

Recording

Of course, the transcendental idealist can always ask the transcendental realist what bridges the natural and social worlds and more generally nature and culture, if not collective intentionality. The transcendental realist replies that this function is fulfilled by recording, which exists in nature (think of the genetic code) and underlies culture. Without recording, as we saw, we could not produce science or culture (at least of the sorts with which we are now familiar), since scientific and cultural productions always involve recordings, for example in the form of writing or printing (such as a musical score).

This is why mankind has attached so much importance to the technical prostheses of memory. Aristotle's view that the transition from perception to experience and then science is made possible by memory[28] seems to have had numerous historical confirmations.[29] Some of these were already available in Aristotle's age, including the fundamental role of writing in the transmission and development of knowledge. Subsequently, we had the printing press and, today (in addition to countless recording devices: phonography, photography, cinematography) we have the internet, which has greatly enhanced the possibilities inherent in memory.

The exponential growth of recording devices that has characterized human history, in particular in recent decades, is not a simple technical accident. I believe it is the revelation of the deep structure of social reality and its need for documents.[30] But this is another story. As per the topic of this paper, the reference to recording and to the difference between construction and dependence allows us to exclude transcendental idealism not only from the natural world (from which it was expelled a long time ago) but also from the social world, where it still enjoys surprising popularity.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The examination of transcendental idealism proposed in the first part of this article shows a circumstance to which perhaps insufficient attention has been paid. Although transcendental idealism officially died in or around the year 1830, its effects have been felt up to and including postmodernism. In fact, the philosophical mainstream of the last two centuries has kept alive the fundamental principle of transcendental idealism, namely that reality is constructed by the subject. This statement could appear less radical (and therefore more acceptable) than in its original formulation simply because it has been weakened in a process—culminating in postmodernism—for which an axiological assumption (the world of culture *is important*) is surreptitiously presented as an ontological thesis (the world of culture is constitutive—vaguely and indeterminately—of the world of nature).

Of course, this position is not inevitable (not least because, when explicitly formulated, it is clearly false). The positions that I summarized in my presentation of "negative realism" reflect the perspective of many philosophers who, over the last two centuries, have fought against transcendental idealism—such as the realists of the Austro-German school who founded *Gestaltpsychologie*, including Gibson as a late adherent, for whom the outside world has an autonomous organization independent of the cognitive activity of the subjects who evolve within it. My positions thus have no claim to originality, except perhaps in the form in which they are presented. From my perspective, in fact, negative realism is not limited to rejecting the claims of transcendental idealism; it allows us also to draw essential distinctions between ontology and epistemology, reality and truth, the external and internal world, and between different types of objects.

Positive realism, finally, aims to develop the full potential of ontology as it is revealed by negative realism. At its basis there is nothing but a Darwinian hypothesis: the interaction between different beings has (nonteleologically) caused the emergence of specialized forms of life, social organization, and knowledge. Here we find

the most powerful and definitive answer to transcendental idealism. If the latter regarded epistemology (and its speculative hypostasis: the spirit) as the condition of the possibility of ontology, then transcendental realism does the opposite: it considers ontology to be the condition of the possibility of epistemology. In this sense, the birth date of transcendental realism should be sought in that "strange inversion of reasoning" that Robert Beverley MacKenzie, in 1868, attributed to Darwin:

> In the theory with which we have to deal, Absolute Ignorance is the artificer; so that we may enunciate as the fundamental principle of the whole system, that, in order to make a perfect and beautiful machine, it is not requisite to know how to make it. Mr. Darwin's, by a strange inversion of reasoning, seems to think Absolute Ignorance fully qualified to take the place of Absolute Wisdom in all the achievements of creative skill.[31]

NOTES

1. Lachterman (1989) rightly recognized this as a feature characteristic of modern philosophy.
2. This response, I believe, reflects an inadvertent slip of reasoning that attempts to generalize Descartes's ontological argument, which seeks to derive the proof of God's existence from His merely conceptual possibility.
3. Ferraris (2004), 43–47. A variation of the transcendental fallacy is what Stove (1991) defined as "the worst argument in the world" because "it argues from the fact that we can know physical things only under our own mental forms to the impossibility of knowing physical things at all."
4. Meillassoux (2006).
5. Bozzi (1990).
6. See again Stove (1991).
7. Foster (2008).
8. Gentile (1922), 3. My emphasis.
9. Rorty (1998), 86: "none of us representationalists have ever doubted that most things in the universe are causally dependent of us. What we question is whether they are representationally independent of us."
10. Grant (2008).
11. McDowell (1994)
12. Harman (2014), x: "Continental philosophy is not yet willing to give up its traditional game of pretending to be neither realist nor antirealist. Even a thinker as formidable as Slavoj Žižek tells us with a straight face that materialism means the external world does not exist—and that he is not an idealist!" See also Braver (2007).
13. For a comprehensive presentation of my theses on realism, see Ferraris (2004, 2013, 2014a).
14. This might seem obvious, but it is actually denied by Markus Gabriel in his contribution to the present issue of *The Monist*.
15. In accordance with Putnam's brain-in-a-vat argument (1982). The argument runs as follows: 1. If I know that P, then I know that I am not a brain in a vat. 2. I do not know that I am not a brain in a vat. 3. Thus, I do not know that P.
16. Described and analyzed in Ferraris (2009, 32–54).
17. Ferraris (2014b).
18. "Epistemology is just the ontology of the knowing process" (Bergman 1964). The comparison to digestion and photosynthesis is taken from Searle (2004).
19. I refer here to the argument concerning the efficaciousness of science in describing reality presented by Putnam (1975) and defended by him against criticism in Putnam (2012) and also by De Caro (2011). See further the discussion of the "slipper experiment" in Ferraris (2002) and (2012, 28–31).
20. Harman (2011).
21. See Gibson (1979); Smith (2001), (2009). Strawson's descriptive metaphysics can also be read as an environmental ontology; see Strawson (1959, 1980).

22. On the notion of *affordance* see again Gibson (1979), and before him Lewin (1935) and Fichte (1796, 342–51).
23. In accordance with Object-Oriented Ontology: Harman (2005, 2010); Bhaskar (2008), Bryant (2011), Garcia (2011).
24. In accordance with Rickert (1923).
25. In the sense of Gibson (1979).
26. Searle (1995), 41.
27. See my (2005) and (2009).
28. *Posterior Analytics*, II, 99b-100a.
29. See Ferraris (2009), 175–223.
30. I have analyzed this in detail in Ferraris (2009) and Ferraris (2014b).
31. Quoted in Dennett (2009, 10061). I thank Jacopo Domenicucci, Vincenzo Santarcangelo, and Enrico Terrone for their valuable comments and, as always, Sarah Da Sanctis—the living proof that the best reader is always the translator.

REFERENCES

Bergmann, G. 1964. *Logic and Reality*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Bhaskar, R. 2008. *A Realist Theory of Science*, London: Routledge.

Bozzi, P. 1990. *Fisica ingenua*, Milano: Garzanti.

Braver, L. 2007. *A Thing of this World: A History of Continental Antirealism*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Bryant, L.R. 2011. *The Democracy of Objects*, Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press.

De Caro, M. 2011. "Review of J. Ritchie, *Understanding Naturalism*," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 1(4): 527–31.

Dennett, D.C. 2009. "Darwin's 'Strange Inversion of Reasoning'," in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 106 Suppl. 1, 10061–65.

Ferraris, M. 2002. "What Is it Like to Be a Slipper?" in *The Dialogue*, n. 1/2002, 164–69.

——. 2004. *Goodbye, Kant!* Albany: SUNY Press 2014.

——. 2005. *Where Are You? Ontology of the Mobile Phone*, New York: Fordham University Press.

——. 2009. *Documentality. Why it Is Necessary to Leave Traces*, New York: Fordham University Press.

——. 2012. *Manifesto of New Realism*, Albany: SUNY Press.

——. 2013. *Positive Realism*, London: Zero Books.

——. 2014a. *Introduction to New Realism*, London: Bloomsbury.

——. 2014b. "Total Mobilization," in *The Monist* 97(2): 201–22.

Fichte, J.G. 1796. *Grundlage des Naturrechts*, Gesamtausgabe der bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschften, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, vol. I/3.

Foster, J. 2008. *A World for Us. The Case for Phenomenalistic Idealism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Franklin, J. 2002. "Stove's Discovery of the Worst Argument in the World," in *Philosophy* 77: 615–24.

Garcia, T. 2011. *Forme et objet*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

Gentile, G. 1922. *The Theory of the Mind as a Pure Act*, London: Macmillan.

Gibson, J.J. 1979. *An Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.

Grant, I.H. 2008. *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*, London: Continuum.

Harman, G. 2005. *Guerrilla Metaphysics. Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things*, Chicago: Open Court.

——. 2011. *The Quadruple Object*, Arlesford: Zero Books.

——. 2014. "Preface" to Ferraris (2004, ix–xii).

Hölldobler, B. and Wilson E.O. 2010. *The Superorganism: The Beauty, Elegance, and Strangeness of Insect Societies*, New York: W.W. Norton.

Lachterman, D.R. 1989. *The Ethics of Geometry. A Genealogy of Modernity*, New York: Routledge.

Lewin, K. 1935. *A Dynamic Theory of Personality: Selected Papers*, New York: McGraw-Hill.

McDowell, J. 1994. *Mind and World*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Meillassoux, Q. 2006. *After Finitude*, London: Continuum.

Moore, G.E. 1939. "Proof of an External World," in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 25: 273–300.

Putnam, H. 1975. "What Is Mathematical Truth?" in Putnam, *Philosophical Papers I, Mathematics, Matter and Method*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 60–78.

——. 1982. *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

——. 2012. "On Not Writing Off Scientific Realism," in *Philosophy in an Age of Science. Physics, Mathematics, and Skepticism*, ed. by M. De Caro and D. Macarthur, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 91–108.

Rickert, H. 1923. "Die Methode der Philosophie und das Unmittelbare," *Logos* XII: 235–80.

Rorty, R. 1981. "Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism," *The Monist* 64(2): 155–74.

——. 1998. "Charles Taylor on Truth," in *Philosophical Papers* III, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 84–97.

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

——. 2004. *Mind: A Brief Introduction*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

——. 2010. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Smith, B. 2001. "Objects and Their Environments: From Aristotle to Ecological Ontology," in A. Frank, J. Raper, and J.-P. Cheylan, eds., *The Life and Motion of Socio-Economic Units*, London: Taylor and Francis, 79–97.

——. 2009. "Toward a Realistic Science of Environments," *Ecological Psychology* 21(2): 121–30.

Stove, D. 1991. "Idealism: a Victorian Horror Story (Part Two)," in *The Plato Cult and Other Philosophical Follies*, Oxford: Blackwell: 135–78.

Strawson, P.F. 1959, *Individuals: Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London: Methuen.

——. 1980. "Reply to Evans," in Z., Van Straaten, ed., *Philosophical Subjects: Essays Presented to P.F. Strawson*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 273–82.