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New Realism as Positive Realism

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Abstract

In this essay I try to give some overall statements in order to show that new realism is to be understood as a kind of positive philosophy. Against constructivism, I argue that there is a prevalence of the objects themselves on our understanding of them (I.) because reality offers a resistance to our attempt to grasp it (II.) depending on its level of dependence from our own understanding, which is different in the case of natural objects, ideal object and social object (III.). This negativity (the impossibility to resolve reality into thinking) leads to an ontological necessity of facticity (IV.). In the second part of this paper I will describe – through the exposition of three key concepts of new realism, i.e. "unamendability", "interaction" and "affordance" – an ascending path for which the negative and the resistance turn into positivity.

Keywords: New-Realism, Ontology, Epistemology, Unamendableness, Documentality

1. The Prevalence of the Object

Dinosaurs lived between the Upper Triassic (about 230 million years ago) and the end of the Cretaceous (about 65 million years ago). The first human beings and their conceptual schemes appeared 250,000 years ago according to some and 500,000 years ago according to others. For 165 million years there were dinosaurs and there were no humans. For 64 million years there were neither humans nor dinosaurs. For half a

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million years now there have been humans but no dinosaurs. This circumstance, that I propose we call "*fact of the pre-existence*," constitutes a problem for Kant and, before him, for Descartes. For these thinkers – as well as for the many philosophers who have followed their lead, whom I collectively refer to as "*Deskant*" – thought is the first and immediate object we experience and we have no contact with the world "out there," if not through the mediation of thought and its categories.

I shall call this position, which represents the mainstream of modern philosophy (Lachterman 1989 and, for a criticism to its contemporary outcomes, see Boghossian 2007), "*Constructivism*." Such a perspective may present itself in different shades, up to the point of arguing that there is nothing given and that everything is constructed by our conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatuses. According to constructivism, one should conclude that before human beings there were no objects (at least as we now know them), but it is clearly not the case. Dinosaurs existed before Deskant and before any "I think" or human being in general. So how are we to deal with this? Maybe Deskant overestimates the role of the subjects and underestimates the autonomous power of the objects, of what is in the world before us and after us, like a fossil or a dinosaur. Deskant culminated in *Postmodernism*, the age that has just passed in which it was believed that, as Gadamer put it, "being that can be understood is language" (Gadamer 2004, 470) or that, in Derrida's words, "there is nothing outside the text."[1] Things were not different among analytic philosophers, where Davidson argued that we do not encounter perceptions, but beliefs (Davidson 1984), and Goodman posited that one constructs the world just like one constructs an artwork (Goodman 1978).

The linguistic turn, therefore, was more properly a conceptual turn, characterized by a *prevalence of the concept* in the construction of experience[2] (and not, mind you, in the *re*construction of experience, in the scientific or philosophical description of it, as it would be entirely reasonable to posit). But there are two possible cases: either reality is actually constructed by our concepts, and then dinosaurs have never

existed (at most there are their fossils, that magically appeared at the precise moment when a human being discovered them); or reality is not made up of concepts, but of objects – like the dinosaurs that lived before humans – and conceptual schemes are only useful for relating to what remains of dinosaurs, so as to try to understand how they were made and how they lived.

To the constructivist prevalence of the concept, I therefore oppose a *prevalence of the object*, that literally accompanies us for life. We are born ("we come into the world") in a world that has pre-existed us since time immemorial, and we die with the awareness – sometimes frustrating, sometimes comforting – of the fact that this world is destined to exist for a long time after us. Children in a pre-linguistic age are already able to segment linguistic reality into objects (Von Hoften and Spelke 1985) – which for Deskant, strictly speaking, would not be possible, given that, presumably, they do not possess the scheme of substance as the permanence of something in time. At the other end of the story, if a dying man speaks in agony, he always refers to real things, objects and actions: washing to do, flowers to water, tires to change. Or roosters to return, as in the case of Socrates, whose last words – that Nietzsche considers "ridiculous and terrible" and hazardously interprets as "O Crito, life is a disease!" – were "O Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Do pay it. Don't forget." (Plato, *Phaedro*, 118b).

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 highest ontological positivity,[3] because – as I will try to show in this essay – 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. And that, at the same time, it gives us a series of affordances, possibilities and resources. The thesis I wish to defend[4] is therefore that – from Aristotle's metaphysics, through Meinong's theory of objects (Meinong 1981), to last century's American "new realism" (Holt, Marvin and Montague 1912), up to the contemporary "object oriented philosophy"[5] – 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 never reflect, to the point that it now presents itself as an authentic philosophical repressed.

From this point of view, and contrary to Wittgenstein's perspective,[6] I assert that, from an ontological point of view, *the world is the totality of all things, not of existing states of affairs* (Garcia 2011). States of affairs, which are no longer a pure being but already engage in a negotiation with knowledge, come at a later stage: they are a consequence of things. It is things that possess an essential positivity: the fact that being is and that there are things in the world is primarily a property of the objects, of the *res extensa*, and not of the subjects, of the *res cogitans* – as instead was claimed by much philosophy of the past few centuries.

It may be objected (I will discuss this later) that such philosophy has never denied the existence of a world "out there", and this is often true. What it has done, though, is even worse. It imagined a world without form, qualities, properties: it is considered as a malleable matter (Putnam 1988, 114) in which it is up to the subjects (capable of making and enhancing forms) to attribute meanings to it and devise uses for it. Now, if the subject (which in the best case scenario is well aware of his own ineptitude and limits, of his own stupidity or lack of imagination, memory and culture) is capable of such an important activity, this is not because of his own peculiar demiurgic quality, but for a diametrically opposite reason. One does not create what one believes, but what one finds, like a bricoleur: in fact, forms, meanings and practices are in large part already present in the world, waiting to be summoned by a human or an animal. This is what the Gestalt psychologist Kurt Koffka has claimed, noting that everything says what it is: "fruit says 'Eat me'; water says 'Drink me'; thunder says 'Fear me'." (Koffka 1999, 7)

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. 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*.[7] 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.[8] 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.

Here is the task of *new realism* (see Ferraris 2013; Gabriel 2013; Beuchot and Jerez 2013): to restore positivity to philosophy. To this purpose, I propose we make a thought experiment. Let us use *epoché* and suspend for a moment Deskant's version so as to follow – as far as is possible – the hypothesis that the coexistence and interaction of different beings in the world depend first of all on the properties of the latter, and not on the schemes of an ordering "I think", that would thus be charged with a hyperbolic responsibility. In short, if we want to make a Copernican revolution, let us do it for real. And instead of putting the subject at the centre of the universe, let us turn him into the secondary spectator of a world that is much older and bigger than him. Awakening from the transcendentalist slumber – or at least disturbing it with a philosophical dream – does not mean embracing a naive realism, which identifies experience with reality, or a metaphysical realism, which views the mind as a mirror of nature. It is, on the contrary, a deconstructive gesture: if deconstruction is the ability to question the *doxa*, prejudice and lazy reason, then – after two full centuries characterized by the

refrain according to which language, history and concepts shape the world – it means doing the opposite, starting from the objects. First of all, we must maintain the awareness that in any case, both when it frustrates us and when it pander to us, the world gives itself as positivity, as richness, as an offer of objects that turn out to be much more fine-grained than the concepts with which we try to measure them. The strategy I will propose in the next three paragraphs is that of examining the assumptions of the prevalence of the concept, criticizing them, and showing the positive alternatives that can be drawn from the prevalence of the object.

2. Ontology and Epistemology

Consider the strongest dependence, namely that brought forward by those who assert (in the form of an extreme *Correlationism* as criticized in Meillassoux 2008) that being does not exist without a correlate of thought. In this case, one could hypothesize that being causally depends on thought: the dinosaur depends on the I think.[9] In this strong version, the dependence of the objects on thought is, then, a *causal dependence*. The origin of this lies is an argument of Berkeley's, which is epistemological and not ontological: if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, it makes no noise. But since, in this version, being (ontology) depends on knowledge (epistemology), Giovanni Gentile concludes that the tree has not really fallen until someone certifies its fall. The problem with this strong dependence is that it contrasts with our most ordinary experience. When we wake up, when we go to sleep, and all the time between waking up and going to sleep, and then again for all the time we are asleep – in short, *all the time* – dinosaurs are never there. In addition to this, as we have seen, there was a time when they were there and we were not. Not to mention the time, really hyperbolic, when there were neither they nor us.

In order to correct the contradictions of this causal dependence I proposed we introduce the distinction between ontology and epistemology. *Ontology* is what there is and *Epistemology* is what we know (or think we know) about what

there is. Once we make this distinction, it will be clear that the ontological assertion underlying causal dependence, i.e. "Dinosaurs (their *being*) are dependent on our conceptual schemes", is obviously false. On the contrary, the epistemological assertion that "Books about dinosaurs, classes of dinosaurs, films about dinosaur, the names of the dinosaurs (in short, all of our *knowledge* about dinosaurs) are dependent on our conceptual schemes" is obviously true. It is on this epistemological and non-ontological basis that we can make statements like "Dinosaurs were there when we were not", "When there were dinosaurs, dinosaurs were there, but there was no such thing as the name 'Tyrannosaurus rex' or any other knowledge about dinosaurs." At this point one might object: how can you exclude that dinosaurs have entered the sphere of appearance at the exact moment in which we found the first remains of a dinosaur? I do not rule this out at all, but in this case "sphere of appearance" would mean "epistemology," that is, precisely what we know of dinosaurs. Such knowledge can grow over time or it could disappear completely, in case our "I think" disappeared like dinosaurs did. Under such a circumstance, the fact would remain that dinosaurs once existed, just as we once did; only, neither we nor the dinosaurs would exist any longer. For now, though, dinosaurs once existed and we *could possibly* cease to exist one day.

In my perspective, reality is composed of two layers that blend 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 referred to by Meinong[10] when he says that it is also possible to judge what does not exist, for example the round square; or by Quine when he says that "to be is to be the value of a variable."[11] But next to, or rather below, the ε-reality I also set the ω-*reality* (in the sense of ὄντως, 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.[12] In short, "real" is for me the combination of ε-reality and ω-reality, working together. The

sceptics use the first one (not even much imaginatively) to deny the second; but it is a futile activity, because the ω-reality has no intention to be erased or set aside. Here is the huge positivity hiding in the ω-reality, here lies its dominance with respect to ε-reality. The ω-reality is the *external world*, an expression with which I dub the world external to our conceptual schemes.

The *external realism* I refer to is not a form of metaphysical realism, but rather a critique of constructivism. I have never thought that myself, a dog and a constructivist all see the world the same way. I am saying – and I shall articulate this point extensively in the section on "interaction" – that we can interact despite the fact that our conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatuses are different. For the benefit of those who objected that thought is the first and perhaps the only object of experience (and that therefore when I suffer from rheumatism of the wrist I am first of all *thinking* I have rheumatism of the wrist) I would suggest considering the following. I can very well think that, when I look at the screen and keyboard of the computer on which I am writing, it is me thinking of the screen and keyboard. However, it does not follow that I have a relationship with the screen and keyboard only when I think. In the same way, the feeling of resistance that my body encounters at this very moment in the seat of the chair is not something that exists only in my thought, nor is it only known through it. The part of my body with which I sit has never been considered a place of thought, not even by the most fervent idealists. Furthermore, the computer, which I see with my eyes and think of with my brain, is an entity represented as external and not internal. And the same goes for any pain in the part of my body with which I sit or in my rheumatic wrist: it would be perceived as a pain in *that* part of the body, and not as a headache – as, after all, would be more plausible if we only had a relationship with thought.

Moreover, if perception truly was a docile colony of conceptual schemes, it would be much more easily conditioned by thought than it actually is. Indeed, it is perception – and not thought, which proves to be far more accommodating, especially if combined with imagination – that gives us the inescapable

feeling that there is something out there, and it does so by notifying to us that what exists primarily resists, says no and refuses to be colonized by thought. The inherently deconstructive role of perception, ultimately, is this: rather than a source of information and an epistemological resource, it should be considered as a stumbling block to our constructivist expectations. In a way, *perceptual deconstruction* is comparable to falsification in Popper, except that here it has an ontological function and not, as in Popper, an epistemological one. What emerges from perceptual deconstruction is a "naive physics" or a "second naïveté." The world gives itself as real, without this necessarily corresponding to some image given to us by science. As I understand it, the appeal to naïveté is not a way to simplify our relationship with reality, but to refine and articulate it.

3. Natural Objects, Ideal Objects, Social Objects

In order to avoid the misinterpretations of causal dependence, antirealists sometimes speak of conceptual dependence, which is one of the possible outcomes of Kant's famous statement: "Intuitions without concepts are blind." Which may, however, be interpreted in two ways: (1) without the concept of "dinosaur" we would not recognize a dinosaur if we saw one. And (2) without the concept of "dinosaur" we would not *see* a dinosaur if we saw one. When it comes to defending Kant, it is said that he meant (1): the conceptual is reconstructive of experience in general. But had he meant (1), he would not have written the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but only the *Metaphysical Foundations Of Natural Science* (see Ferraris 2013b), namely a theory of science. If he wrote the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is because he meant (2): the conceptual is constitutive of experience in general. Now, if causal dependence is invalidated by the pre-existence argument, conceptual dependence is invalidated by *the interaction argument*, which I will extensively dwell on later: if I now met an extremely long-lived or revived dinosaur, I could interact with it even though its conceptual schemes are likely to be very different from mine. We generally interact with beings who have conceptual

schemes and perceptual apparatuses that are profoundly different from our own, or that have none at all.

Making perceptual experience (and not, as we will see shortly, social experience) depends 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 absolute darkness reigns when the diaphragm is closed. It is not difficult to find a trace of the stimulus error in the idea of incommensurability between paradigms initially defended by Kuhn (1962): an idea which, if followed to the end, would have led to say that Ptolemy and Copernicus did not have the same perceptual experience of the Sun. The very contrast between the manifest image and the real image of the world, from this point of view, can be traced to the scope of the stimulus error, which is revealed as a typical result of the confusion between ontology and epistemology.

In order to make sense of conceptual dependence, it is therefore necessary to introduce, next to the categories of *natural objects* (that exist in space and time independently of the subject) and *ideal objects* (that exist outside of space and in time independently of the subject), the category of *social objects*, which exist in space and time dependently on the subject[13] – although this dependence is far from simple and transparent. From this point of view, it is entirely legitimate to say that the stock market or democracy present a representational dependence on our collective beliefs. But this does not mean in any way that dinosaurs have some kind of conceptual dependence with respect to our collective beliefs. If anything, conceptual dependence concerns professorships of palaeontology. But professorships of palaeontology do not make dinosaurs exist, while the statements of rating agencies do, in fact, increase or decrease the credit spread. In this sense, the being of dinosaurs seems to have an essential character of being

in its focal form: namely, its independence from thought, contrary to the dependencies hypothesised by Deskant.

In fact, saying that everything is socially constructed and that there are no facts, only interpretations (as is suggested by the postmodern version of Deskant, let us call it *Foukant* to distinguish it from the historian Foucault, who was a great thinker and was able to radically revise his positions (Foucault 2011)), is not deconstructing but, on the contrary, formulating a thesis – the more accommodating in reality the more critical it is in imagination – that leaves everything as it is. There is indeed a great conceptual work that interpretation-friendly thinkers withdraw from when they say that everything is socially constructed – which, *nota bene*, implies that tables and chairs do not have a separate existence, that is, to put it more bluntly, that they do not really exist in the mode of existence that common sense usually attributes to tables and chairs. This work consists in distinguishing carefully between the existence of things that exist only for us, i.e. things that only exist if there is a humanity, and things that would exist even if humanity had never been there. That is why, in my opinion, the real deconstruction must commit to distinguishing between regions of being that are socially constructed and others that are not; to establishing for each region of being some specific modes of existence, and finally to ascribing individual objects to one of these regions of being, proceeding case by case.[14]

So *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.

So, in my proposal, 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 mind of the people involved in the act. Besides, it is worth noting that writing is today at the centre of the greatest revolution of our time, with e-mails, tablets, mobile phones we *write* with – which is a surprise, given that throughout last century there was talk of the end of writing. Writing cannot die because it is essential for the construction of social reality: just think of the millions of people who have died and whose name we do not even know because writing had not been invented yet, while we know the biblical patriarchs and the Egyptian Pharaohs one by one.

What I propose under the title of "*documentality*" is thus a "*weak textualism*" (that is, also a "weak constructivism"): weak because it assumes that inscriptions are decisive in the construction of *social* reality, but – contrary to what we may define "strong textualism", practiced by postmodernists – it excludes that inscriptions may be constitutive of reality *in general*. Weak textualism is therefore such as it results from the weakening of Derrida's thesis that "there is nothing outside the text," which is transformed into "*there is nothing* social *outside the text*", in the two variants of *strong document* (constitution of an act) and *weak document* (recording of a fact). Weak textualism thus admits a moderate constructivism, which does not clash with the realistic intuition

Thus it becomes possible to *reconstruct deconstruction*, assigning the realist intuition and the constructivist one each to their sphere of competence. This produces the following results: 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); 5. the realist intuition and the constructionist intuition have therefore equal legitimacy in their respective fields of application.

4. Thing and Necessity

The weakest form of dependence that constructivists refer to is *representational dependence*[15]: we are not the creators of the universe, but we are its constructors starting from an amorphous *hyle*, a cookie dough for us to shape with the stencils of our concepts. Thus the separate existence of a world is acknowledged, but the world as such is taken to have no structural and morphological autonomy, at least not that we know of. Yet, if we try to give a concrete form to representational dependence, we will realize that the technical term hides some conceptual confusion. 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 humans. 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,[16] given that when the Tyrannosaurus Rex existed we did not, it would paradoxically follow that when there was the Tyrannosaurus Rex, the Tyrannosaurus Rex was not there. Ontology (what there is) is systematically resolved into epistemology (what we know, or think we know), just like the Tyrannosaurus Rex is systematically confused with the word "Tyrannosaurus Rex".

The moral that can be drawn from this is simply that *constructivism does not work and is false*, at least if applied to the totality of objects. But how was it possible to believe all this? The explanation can be easily found in the fundamental mistake made by Deskant, i.e. the *trascendental fallacy*, which consists in the confusion between ontology and epistemology. At its origin there is a strategy that can be found in Descartes

(1901), Hume (1739-40), Kant (2008, A1, B1), and Hegel (2004): knowledge is first of all sensible knowledge, but the senses deceive, therefore we must switch to conceptual knowledge. Constructivism is thus born out of the need to re-found, through construction, a world that no longer has stability and that, as Hamlet says, "is out of joint."[17] In order to do so, the transcendental fallacy appears to be the winning move: 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 constructionism – 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.

Kant then adopts an *a priori* epistemology, i.e. mathematics, to found ontology: the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements 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 (Ferrarin 1995). The laws of physics and mathematics are applied to reality and, in Kant's hypothesis, they are not the contrivance of a group of scientists, but they are the way in which our minds and senses 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. And since knowledge is inherently construction, there is no difference, in principle, between the fact that we know the object X and the fact that we *construct* it – just like in mathematics, where knowing 7 + 5 = 12 is equivalent to constructing the addition 7 + 5 = 12. Of course, Kant invites us to think that behind the phenomenal object X there is a noumenal object Y, a thing in itself inaccessible to us, but the fact remains that the sphere of being coincides to a very

large extent with that of the knowable, and that the knowable is essentially equivalent to the constructible.[18]

At the origin of the transcendental fallacy there is therefore an interweaving of topics: 1. the senses deceive (they are not 100% certain); 2. induction is uncertain (it is not 100% certain); 3. science is safer than experience, because it has mathematical principles independent from the deceptions of the senses and the uncertainties of induction; 4. experience must then be resolved in science (it must be founded by science or, at worst, it must be unmasked by it as a "manifest image" and misleading); 5. since science is the construction of paradigms, at this point experience will be construction too, namely it will shape the world starting from conceptual schemes. Here is the origin of postmodernism.

It is worth noting that Kant, unlike Deskant and Foukant, had already become aware of this difficulty with the *Critique of Judgment*, through which he rejected the *Critique of Pure Reason*. First, in the critique of aesthetic judgment, Kant wrote that the beautiful is liked without a concept: in other words, he dethroned the conceptual and did so in an area where perception is particularly important. Second, in the critique of teleological judgment, Kant explicitly proposed a theory of science: nature has no end in itself, it is we who assign ends to it so as to be able to scientifically investigate it. Third, Kant argued that the reflective judgment introduced in the Third Critique, which starts from the single instance and rises to the general rule, should be set next to the determinant judgment of the First Critique, which descends from the general rule to the single instance; nevertheless, there are good reasons to believe that what he referred to was the need to replace the determinant judgment rather than merely integrating it. In fact, it is hard to see how the determinant judgment could coexist with the reflective judgment, in a strange amphibious mode where it would be up to subject to choose which to employ. In any case, even if the subject resorted to the reflective judgment (and we can be sure that she would only use that one), she would not be able to reply to the objections brought forward by Hume, because in fact the reflective

judgment is in all respects the empiricist induction, which starts from the single instance and rises to the rule.

The point, though, is that it is far from obvious that when we turn to the world instead of thought we fall into uncertainty. As usual, Deskant is too sceptical of objects, their solidity, their positivity. With the transcendental fallacy Kant tried to reply to Hume, who had insisted precisely on the contingency of the laws of nature and the structural uncertainty of induction: his answer consisted in founding experience by means of science, and science through a system of *a priori* categories that, according to Kant, drew their necessary character from the apriority itself. Now – and this is the great metaphysical intuition by Kripke (1980),[19] whose consequences have probably not been fully exploited yet – necessity does not derive from apriority, and there may be *a posteriori* principles that are necessary. Thus, the theme of a *de re* necessity is developed: it is what I would call an *ontological necessity*, that has to be distinguished from epistemological necessity (which is *de dicto*, and is derived and not foundational of ontological necessity). After all, Aristotle, whom Kant rebuked for picking up his categories in a "rhapsodic" way, gave birth to a much more solid construct than the Kantian one – in fact, "place", "time" and "situation" survived the passing of time much better than the category of "reciprocal action". If things are in these terms, the need that underlies the transcendental fallacy is revealed as a mere misunderstanding that arises precisely from having identified necessity with apriority and aposteriority (i.e. the object) with contingency.

Ontological necessity can be articulated through the argument from facticity.[20] We build cars, use them, sell them, and this undoubtedly depends on us. Yet the *fact* that we build cars, that there were things before us and that there will be things after us does *not* depend on us. There is a unique character to existence, and this is the line that divides ontology from epistemology, providing the very meaning of what we call "being." (Berto 2010) There cannot be a generalised constructivism with regard to facts, and this is because, banally, there are facts that precede us: we could all say, like

Erik Satie, "I have come into the world very young into an era very old".

In this world that is given to us, "we follow the rule blindly", as is suggested by Wittgenstein: that is – translating this formula into our terms – we rely on an ontology that precedes epistemology. We encounter objects that have an ontological consistence independently from our knowledge and that, either suddenly or through a slow process, are then known by us. We find out parts of ourselves (for instance, that we are envious or that we have fear of mice) just like we discover pieces of nature. We notice elements of society (for instance, enslavement, exploitation, women's subordination and then, with a greater sensitivity, also mobbing or political incorrectness) that turn out to be unbearable and that were previously hidden, namely assumed as obvious by a political or sociologic unconscious. This encounter is not a form of acceptation. The moment of consciousness will undoubtedly and hopefully come, but it will be a matter of acknowledging what the world is and what we are. In the psychological and social world, the motto could be "I am therefore I (sometimes) think". And what I think is not the result of an absolute, constitutive and independent intentionality, but a collection of *documentality* (a complex articulation of records) made of traditions, languages, influences that outline the plot of the psychic world no less than the social.[21]

From this point of view, reality is not transparent, and therefore the real is not necessarily rational; on the contrary, reality is dialectical, or rather, it is a concrete example of *the activity of the negative*. This is not a miraculous transmutation, but simply the exploitation of resources inherent to the real world, which, as much as it is capable of resisting us, is also able to support and invite us. A world totally dependent on our conceptual schemes would fail to explain the opacity of our knowledge, the frustration of many of our experiences, the vanity and tenacity of many of our hopes, as well as surprise and the opening of possibilities.[22]

Being surprised – an attitude that manifests itself in the early days of life – shows that the mind has an inherently predictive attitude (we expect regularity), but not a constructive

one (it is not regularities that we see: we see what is there, and it can surprise us). The same applies to boredom, which is the inverse of surprise: if we were always interpreting, we would never get bored, or we would get bored for always knowing the answer. It is in surprise that we find the quintessence of the *thing in itself*, the thing that was not expected by our conceptual schemes and our perceptual apparatuses. If regularity is the stigma of epistemology, surprise is the sure sign of ontology. If I am expecting something, and something different occurs, that is a thing in itself. And the same goes for all the qualitative attributes that were not part of my expectations. Because they have a piece of "*per se*" that cannot be ascribed to the subject, but belongs to the world.

In the second part of this essay I will describe – through the exposition of three key concepts of new realism, i.e. "unamendability", "interaction" and "affordance" – an ascending path for which the negative and the resistance turn into positivity. It is a dialectic that – bear this in mind – lies not in thought, but in the world.

5. Unamendabilty

How does facticity, i.e. the sphere of the world of objects, phenomenologically manifest itself? First of all in a negative way (with respect to concepts) and in a positive way (with respect to objects). That is, it manifests itself as *unamendability*:[23] the fundamental characteristic of what there is, is that it always wins over epistemology, because it does not let itself be corrected – and this is, after all, an infinitely more powerful necessity than any logical necessity. If I now met a dinosaur, it would not suffice for me to think that dinosaurs disappeared 165 million years ago to make it disappear. I may or may not know that water is H_2O, I will get wet anyway, and I will not be able to dry up by means of the thought that hydrogen and oxygen as such are not wet. And this – in accordance with interaction, which I will talk about in the next section – would also happen for a dog, with conceptual schemes different from mine, or a worm, or even an inanimate being such as my computer (which, although unaware of the chemical

composition of water, could undergo irreparable damage in the unfortunate case where a glass of water capsized on the keyboard).

This, however, is not only a limit: it is also a resource, a positivity. Unamendability, in fact, informs us about the existence of an external world, not in relation to our body (which is part of the external world), but in relation to our minds, and more specifically with respect to the conceptual schemes with which we try to explain and interpret the world. As we have seen, unamendability manifests itself primarily as a phenomenon of resistance and contrast. I can embrace all the theories of knowledge in this world, I can be atomistic or Berkeleian, postmodernist or cognitivist, I can think, with naive realism, that what is perceived is the true world or I can think, with the Vedanta doctrine, that what is perceived is the false world. The fact remains that what we perceive is unamendable, it can not be corrected: if the sun is up, sunlight is always blinding. There is no interpretation to be opposed to these facts: the only alternative are sunglasses.

Unamendability is a *non-conceptual content* (Evans 1984), and it is 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 resistance, something that can not be nullified. At the same time, it is also an autonomous organisation of experience, which reduces the burden of the ordering activity that is attributed to conceptual schemes. In fact, the activity of conceptual schemes applies primarily to knowledge, but it seems excessive to also attribute to them the organization of ordinary experience, as is done by the philosophies of Kantian-hermeneutic approach. Moreover, there is also a sense in which conceptual thought may not lie in the head – as, for example, when I make calculations with pen and paper or with an abacus. Everything is outside, inside I have nothing, and yet it seems that I am calculating.[24]

From unamendability we can draw an ontological conclusion: *to exist is to resist* (Ferraris 2012b). This motto must be understood in two ways. The first is overtly political, and I shall not dwell on it as I have extensively discussed it elsewhere

(Ferraris 2013a and 2013d). I will here limit myself to reminding you that considering reality as something docile and malleable can justify any mystification. But there is a second sense, an ontological one. Quine said that "to be is to be the value of a variable" (Quine 1948) and that there is "no entity without identity" (Quine 1966) these sayings imply that ontology should be absorbed into epistemology and postulate that being is transparency, namely that only what is clear and distinct exists. To this view, I oppose the idea that being as resistance is a concrete noumenon: it is a variety of things in themselves, a variety that is the ordinary stuff of our experience and that constitutes the possibility of a world for us and for beings with conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatuses radically different from ours.

In its resistance, the real is the *extreme negative of knowledge*, because it is the inexplicable and the incorrigible, 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 a fantasy or wishful thinking. The problem presented by interpretation (which is a form of epistemology, precisely because there is no epistemology without interpretation), when – in an intemperate form that yet does not at all correspond to the physiology of interpretation – it claims that there are no facts, only interpretations, is precisely that it chooses to be blind to this unamendability.

Thus, it is not "cogito, ergo sum", but "it resists, therefore it exists." This is the condition I propose we call "*ontological opacity*": the antithesis of the equation between the rational and the real. There is no logical answer to the question "why is there something instead of nothing" (Berto 2010 and Wolff 1728), and, in the same way, we have no difficulty in thinking that ideal objects have always existed, even before the Big Bang. This does not mean that the rational is unreal, nor (even less so) that the real is irrational. It means (as we shall see in the last paragraph when talking about "affordance") that epistemology is an outcome of thought which in turn is the result of an evolutionary story that begins in something that is being and not thought.

This ontological opacity, in my opinion, is constitutive; it is in this sense that my perspective differs from the view brilliantly defended by Markus Gabriel, for whom "to exist is to appear in a field of sense" (Gabriel 2013). Which means, for instance, that Harry Potter exists in the field of meaning of fantastic literature and atoms exist in that of physics. The only thing that, for Gabriel, does not exist is the world, understood not as the physical universe, but as the sum of all fields of sense: the field of sense of all fields of sense (i.e. the absolute) does not exist. Nevertheless, making ontology depend on a field of sense – that is, if not on epistemology at least on something tied to subjectivity – re-proposes a version, although a weakened one, of the transcendental fallacy. Furthermore, it leaves open the problem of non-human beings, of those we call (in such a confused manner) "animals": it is hard to claim that there is, for them, a field of sense in which there are atoms or characters like Harry Potter. But it is problematic (also from a moral point of view) to exclude the existence, for instance, of death in a slaughterhouse – which, nonetheless, can be hardly inserted (both for an animal and for a human) into a "field of sense," since it presents itself as an opaque and resisting nonsense.

6. Interaction

The turning of negativity into positivity, of resistance into possibility, is not a conceptual alchemy, but evidence offered by *interaction*.[25] One of our most common experiences is that we interact with beings who have conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatuses different from our own, 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, independent of our conceptual schemes. In short, the point is not to know what it feels like to be a bat, but rather to note the fact that humans and bats unquestionably inhabit the same

world (Nagel 1974). Both a man and a cat know how to use the seat of a chair (the first to sit down, the second to curl up on it) and can fight over it, and this does not seem to depend on the sharing of concepts, but on the positivity of the specific object: that is, the seat of a chair. I will try to illustrate this point with the slipper experiment, developed several years ago (Ferraris 2001), and which I reproduce below.

1. *People*. Take a man looking at a carpet with a slipper on it; he asks another to pass him the slipper, and the other, usually, does so without significant difficulty. It is a trivial phenomenon of interaction, but it shows very well how, if indeed the outside world depended even just a little bit not even on interpretations and conceptual schemes but on neurons, then the fact that the two do not possess the *same* neurons should make the sharing of the slipper impossible. It might be objected that neurons do not have to be exactly identical in number, position or connections; this, however, not only weakens the argument, but it contradicts evidence that is difficult to refute: the fact that differences in past experiences, culture, conformations and brain equipment may lead to significant divergences at a certain level (does the Spirit proceed from the Father and the Son, or only from the Father? What do we mean by "freedom"?) is trivial, and it is the reason why there are disputes between opinions. But the slipper on the carpet is another thing: it is external and separate from us and our opinions, and it is therefore provided with an existence that is qualitatively different from the kind that we tackle, say, in discussing the status of issues such as euthanasia or preventive war. In other words, the sphere of facts is not so inextricably interwoven with that of interpretations. Dialogue can be important when there is a normative element at stake: in order to determine whether something is legitimate or not, it is better to have a look at what people think and debate the issue. But to determine whether the slipper is on the carpet I merely have to look at it or touch it. In any case, discussing it would be of little help.

2. *Dogs*. Now let's take a dog that has been trained. He is told, "Bring me the slipper." And, again, he does so without encountering any difficulties, just like the man above, even though the differences between his brain and the man's are enormous and his understanding of "Bring me the slipper" may not seem comparable to that of a human. In fact, the dog does not ask himself whether the man is really asking him to bring the slipper or if he is quoting the sentence or using it in an ironic sense – while it is likely that at least some people would.
3. *Worms*. Now let's take a worm. It has no brain nor ears; it has no eyes, it is far smaller than the slipper and only has the sense of touch, whatever such an obscure sense may mean. So we can not say to it, "Bring me the slipper." However, crawling on the carpet, if it meets the slipper, it can choose between two strategies: either turn around it, or to climb over it. In both cases, it encounters the slipper, although not quite like I encounter it.
4. *Ivy*. Then let's take ivy. It has no eyes, it has nothing whatsoever, but it climbs (or at least thus we express ourselves, treating it as an animal and attributing a deliberate strategy to it) up the walls as if it were seeing them, or moves slowly away if it finds sources of heat that annoy it. The ivy will either bypass the slipper, or it will climb over it, not too unlike the way a man would do in front of an obstacle of larger size, but with no eyes nor conceptual schemes.
5. *Slipper*. Finally, take a slipper. It is even more insensitive than the ivy. But if we throw the slipper onto the other, it encounters it, much like it happens to the ivy, the worm, the dog and the man. So it is really hard to understand in what sense even the most reasonable and minimalist thesis about the intervention of the perceiver upon the perceived can make some kind of ontological claim; let alone the strong ones. Also because one could very well not take another slipper, but simply imagine that the first one is there, in the absence of any animal observer, or without a vegetable or another

> slipper interacting with it. Would there be no slipper on the carpet, then? If the slipper is really there, then it must be there even if no one sees it, as is logically implied by the sentence "There is a slipper" – otherwise one could say "It seems to me that there is a slipper" or, even more correctly, "I have in me the representation of a slipper", if not even "I have the impression that I have in me the representation of a slipper". Consider that making the existence of things depend on the resources of my sense organs is *per se* not at all different from having them depend on my imagination, and when I argue that there is a slipper *only* because I see it I am actually confessing to have a hallucination.

In other words, *meaning is not in the mind, but in the world* (Putnam 1975a, 227). Recall the famous thought experiment of the two lands that have a liquid phenomenically identical to water, except that in the first case it is H_2O, while in the second it is XYZ (and it is not water, although the natives think it is). The argument of interaction passes from epistemology to ontology: given that the properties of the two waters, irrespectively of their chemical composition, are the same, then there is an even stronger sense in which meaning is in the world. Both H_2O as XYZ invite you to drink and bathe, suggesting a way to use them both for humans (who at one point, thanks to epistemology, will discover that those are not the same liquid) and for non-human beings, who will probably never know.

From this, another obvious consequence follows: it makes no sense to say that we are dealing with phenomena. If we are dealing with something, we are dealing with things in themselves. Arguing that the objects of our experience are phenomena and not things in themselves (or, for the sake of brevity, real things) is not different from claiming that when I give a note to the newsagent there are two notes: the given one and the taken one – the same would go for the newspapers I bought, and the rest would be multiplied exponentially.[26] But if things are in these terms, then what we know (i.e. phenomena) are things in themselves, which we know, more or less, well (a

table encountered by a cat, used by a customer in a restaurant, rated by a antiquarian, studied by a chemical forensics to solve a case).

In the formation of Kant's theory of the phenomenon, the reflection on secondary qualities was of great importance (Allais 2007). When I turn on the light the table is white, but if I turn it off the table is black, or at least I cannot see it. How can I say that the table is a thing in itself? Evidently, it depends on me, whereas primary qualities such as extension and impenetrability do not. Kant extends this circumstance to primary qualities, which in the transcendental perspective are subordinate to space and time, as they are pure forms of sensibility placed in us and not in the world. Yet, as seducing as it may be from a theoretical point of view, this theory generates a large number of problems.

The first problem is that of the location of phenomena. Kant asserts, for example, that the colour red is not an attribute of a rose (Kant 2008, B69-70) (a topic that is closely related to the argument on secondary qualities regarding colours that disappear when the lights are turned off). At this point, however, some difficult questions must be answered. If the redness is not in the rose, then where is it? In our minds? Somewhere in between? And if it is in fact in our minds, then why is it not blue? We must not forget that the only glimpse of the thing in itself in the *Critique of Pure Reason* concerns this very redness (Kant 2008, A 100-101): namely when Kant (entirely contradicting the transcendental perspective) states that if cinnabar were not permanently red our imagination would never be able to associate to the colour red other properties of the mineral, such as its weight and shape.

We might call the second problem the "nesting of phenomena". It develops an argument originally brought forward by Strawson (1966), who noted how spatial phenomena, being contained within temporal phenomena, are phenomena to the second power. Nonetheless, we can observe that, since temporal phenomena are in turn contained within the "I think", which in turn is a phenomenon, then spatial phenomena become phenomena to the third power. And there is nothing to prevent an infinite progress or regress, in which case we would

have phenomena of phenomena of phenomena.

The third and final problem concerns, so to speak, authenticity. If we consider that Kant includes the "I think" (that is, ourselves as well as, obviously, all other human beings) among phenomena, then at least two problems arise. First, when I feel pain I would have to think of it as a pure phenomenon, an appearance, and not as a thing in itself and an irreducible qualitative element. Second, I could be completely different from what I believe to be, in which case punishment or reward, just like the entire moral world, would no longer have any value — something Kant suggested when he asserted that, in the world of phenomena, we have no proof of the fact that there has ever been, in the history of the world, a single free action. Third, we would find ourselves considering ourselves, along with our friends and relatives, as phenomena (while we consider them as being things in themselves), leading to odd propositions such as "my daughter is a phenomenon and not a thing in itself". Normal elements of the grammar of relations; the meaning of our ipseity and of the first person character of our experiences; the alterity of our neighbour: all this would disappear and, in particular, we would be unable to explain the reason why feeling extraneous to oneself (which should be the physiology of an "I think" recognised as a phenomenon) is normally perceived as a pathology.

If we consider these difficulties, then perhaps we are entitled to a real Copernican revolution, one that would put the subject at the margins, and not at the centre, of experience. And we might realise that things in themselves are all but rare; in fact, they make up a rather lush jungle, constituting the fabric of our material, social and ideal word. Let us verify this.

1. *Natural objects*. Let us begin with natural objects. For Kant, 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. But this is clearly false, as is demonstrated by the fact of pre-existence and the argument of interaction: if natural objects really had any

of the three dependencies (causal, conceptual, representational) I have enumerated, neither pre-existence nor interaction would be explainable.

2. *Artifacts*. This obviously applies not only to natural objects, but also to artifacts: namely the slippers, tables, chairs and supermarket objects that are for us the quintessence of objects. Of course, they depend on humans for their manufacturing. Yet, once manufactured, they lend themselves to beings that have different conceptual schemes and perceptive apparatuses than ours. The family cat is perfectly capable of eating biscuits and cuddling up on an armchair. So, why suppose that the armchair and biscuits are one thing for us and another for the cat? What stops us from concluding that artifacts such as an armchair and cat biscuits are things in themselves? Everything we will shortly talk about when discussing the "affordance" of the world presupposes a similar initiative on the part of the objects. This is particularly visible in artifacts, in which the affordance is a structural part of the object (the artifact is made in view of some purpose). This does not mean that the artifact limits its usability to the scope prescribed by those who conceived it. The evolution of computers, from computational tools to multimedia devices, is just one of the countless examples of the fact that there is an evolution of objects that appears determined much more by their character of "affordance" rather than by the subjects" planning – who, so to speak, merely correspond to the affordance.
3. *Social Objects*. 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. Now, there is a universe of things like marriages and divorces,

financial crises, banknotes and academic titles, and it would be quite difficult to argue that these are simple phenomena, or masks of a Thing In Itself that loves to hide. 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; a true fine is a thing in itself, just like a real 10 Euro banknote, a will or a vehicle registration form. In the case of social objects we have a perfect coincidence of internal and external, as is demonstrated by the fact that the disappearance of appearance involves the disappearance of essence. What kind of wedding is one that everyone forgets about (including those directly involved) and whose documents are lost? Weddings, tribunals and altars are systematically accompanied by documentality, that is, by memory, and by the technological prosthesis of memory constituted by writing.

4. *Ideal Objects*. Now consider ideal objects. Is 2 + 2 = 4 a phenomenon? Perhaps. But only provided that a Cartesian daemon pretends that 2 + 2 = 4, while in reality 2 + 2 = 5. Aside from this consideration, all objects of thought, even in strictly Kantian terms, are things in themselves, given that Kant expressly asserts that he established the distinction between phenomenon and noumenon in order to limit sensibility's claims of access to things themselves. Since ideal objects are outside space and time independently from subjects, there should be no reason to affirm that they are phenomena and not things in themselves, since one of their main characters is that they develop their properties independently of the subjects' will.
5. *Feelings*. Furthermore, once the contradictions of the Self and the Other as phenomena examined above have been taken into consideration, who could deny that feelings are things in themselves? If I state that I am happy, could anyone object that I am so only as a phenomenon, and that perhaps as something in itself I am sad? As a matter of fact, the distinction between euphoria and happiness or between depression and

> sadness exists, proving that feelings such as happiness and sadness are not things in themselves, but are rather tied to other things in themselves; that is, the existence of objects outside us that cause happiness or sadness (as opposed to what occurs in euphoria or depression).

7. Affordance

"*Tat tvam asi*", "That art thou" (a screwdriver, for instance). The judgment of the Vedas lends itself to a very concrete interpretation, which reveals a further positivity of reality: things suggest to us a way to use them. To illustrate this point I would like to start with a debate that took place twenty years ago between Richard Rorty and Umberto Eco (see Eco 2012). At one point, in order to illustrate the plasticity of the world with respect to our vital objectives, Rorty stated that "I can clean my ears with a screwdriver." Eco, instead, excluded such a possibility, while suggesting a different, non-canonical use of the screwdriver (which echoes the practice of the "crime of the screwdriver" in Italy in the sixties): namely the turning of the screwdriver into a weapon. That seems to be all: the constructivist claims that reality is docile with respect to our purposes, while the negative realist objects that it can also say no to us.

Under closer inspection, however, the situation is more complex and promising than this, because even starting from this simple comparison we will realize that the small fragment of reality constituted by the screwdriver does not merely provide denials, but – at the same time – it offers an *affordance*, or rather, many affordances: *every negation entails a determination, and every determination is a revelation*. The negativity deriving from our inability to use a screwdriver as a glass or as a needle to sew buttons and from our difficulty in using it as a substitute for cotton buds hides at least as many positive possibilities: we can use it as a stiletto, a paper knife, a lever, a punch, a spit, a mallet and so forth.

If this applies to such a simple object as a screwdriver, it is not difficult to imagine how many more opportunities are offered by ontologically richer objects, both within the sphere of

natural objects and in that of social objects. Ecosystems, state organizations, interpersonal relationships: in each of these structures, that are infinitely more complex than a screwdriver, we find the structure of denial and affordance. It may be objected that perhaps those objects are nothing without a subject capable of giving them a meaning, but we should be very cautious on this point: first of all, what do we mean by "subject"? Can this notion be tolerant enough to include a superorganism like a termite mound? (Hölldobler and Wilson 2008) And, if not, how is it that a termite mound reveals such a strong and evolutionarily powerful structure?

By using the term "affordance" I am referring to a notion that has been widely popular in the last century, during an arc that from phenomenology came to *Gestalt* psychology and Heidegger's existential analytics. The idea is that, at least to some extent, meanings are in the world, incorporated in the objects, which offer us *affordances* – the term was coined by Gibson (1979), but it has a significant background in Fichte's "*Aufforderungscharakter*" (Fichte 1796, 341-351). The world calls us, gives us possibilities and positivities, offering us something that is given, and not merely thought. After all, it is the other side of pragmatism, which had the merit of insisting that our relationship with the world is not only cognitive, but involves an action, a willingness on the part of the subject, who does not merely contemplate, but uses resources, searches for solutions, transforms situations.

However, if this action is possible, this is due to the fact that reality call us: let us not forget that the Italian "*cosa*" (thing) comes from the Latin "*causa*" (cause), and that the Greek word for "thing" is "πράγμα", whence derive "practice", "pragmatics", "pragmatism" and so on. Quite simply (and do not ever overestimate the richness and depth of this banality), a handle invites you to be grasped, with a property that is not in the subject, but in the object. And it is hard not to see a face in a house with two windows and a door in the middle of what (with the same inevitability with which we speak of "bottlenecks" and "table legs") is significantly called its "façade". We may not want it, we can avoid thinking about it, but it is so: it is stronger than us because the initiative lies in

the affordance that comes from the object, which is not a docile and amorphous support, but a place crowded with qualities, quantities, shapes, properties, and – above all – possibilities.

Affordances have an epistemologically important consequence. Eugene Wigner, Nobel Prize winner for physics, has spoken of "the unreasonable effectiveness of mathematics", and Putnam has enunciated a *miracle argument* (Putnam 1975b and Putnam 2012): if there was no *one* reality working as a substratum both for the world of life and that of science, how would we explain the fact that the latter is so efficacious on the first? Through a sort of occasionalism? By means of a pre-established harmony? The problem with this argument of Putnam's is, though, that it exposes itself to a counter-objection, because the anti-realist could reply: "If you cannot give me valid arguments in favour of realism apart from the functional efficaciousness of science, then this efficaciousness might very well be simply a miracle, and yours an act of faith".

In order to avoid this objection, I propose the *hypothesis of emergence*. As we have seen, social sciences are effective because they apply a product of the human world to the human world itself. In natural sciences such a path is undoubtedly longer, but still possible. We need to show the emergence of thought from being: a process that, thanks to Darwin, can be conceived as the development of an (intelligent) epistemology on the basis of an unintelligent ontology (see Dennett 2009).[27] The mind emerges from the world and in particular from the piece of world that is the closest to it: the body and the brain. Then it confronts itself with the social and natural environment and with itself. In this encounter – that is a reconstruction and a revelation and not a construction – the mind elaborates (individually, but even more so collectively) an epistemology, a kind of knowledge that assumes being as its object. The perfect encounter between the mind and the body, just like that between ontology and epistemology, is not granted: mistakes are always possible. But when the mind manages to reconcile itself with the world it comes from (which, I repeat, does not at all mean providing an exact photograph of it, also because the world is in motion and hard to photograph), then we have truth.

Nevertheless, one might point out that Nagel has recently claimed that the debate between the Darwinians and the supporters of the "intelligent design" of the universe has not proved the validity of the theses of the latter, but revealed some weaknesses in the former (Nagel 2012). According to Nagel, the Darwinian hypothesis does not manage to explain phenomena such as consciousness, knowledge and values. In fact, what is the point of having a consciousness that, as Hamlet put it, makes cowards of us all? And how can we explain the emergence of intelligence in matter?

As we have said, in neo-Darwinian terms, we could claim that, just like the living is made up of inorganic elements to which it will return (and we find nothing miraculous about this), so intelligence can very well stem from non-intelligent elements. All the same, Nagel sees this conception as a reductionist bias that seems all the more evident when consciousness and intelligence reach abstract levels that seem to exclude the very necessity of a mankind capable of thought.[28]

Here, though, Nagel underestimates the resources underlying emergence. In such a long time as that separating us from the Big Bang and with such a vast material as the universe, anything can happen, including consciousness and transfinite numbers. This is analogous to the library of Babel imagined by Borges, which contains everything, including the day and exact time of our death – only, this piece of information (of uncertain evolutional usefulness) is buried between billions of other likely or unlikely hours and days, and billions of billions of meaningless books – which, by the way, explains the world's high degree of opacity and senselessness.

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 specialized product of evolution. This circumstance explains why epistemology could successfully relate to ontology, as the history of science proves. 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 inner 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 ←→ Reality

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

(2) Thought → Reality

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

(3) Thought ← Reality

This is why sense "gives itself" and is not at our complete disposal, just like the possibilities and impossibilities of the screwdriver. The sense is the mode of organisation for which something presents itself in a given way. But it does not ultimately depend on subjects, as it is not the production of a transcendental I with its categories. It is something like Husserl's passive synthesis, or like the "synopsis of sense" enigmatically mentioned by Kant in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 2008, A 97): the fact that the world has an order prior to the appearance of the subject. A figure can appear on the ground.

Obviously, starting from the objects and opacity involves being aware that a full totality can never be, and that our relationship with the world is a confusing balance between ontology and epistemology.[29] This, however, does not mean that the positivity of these objects is precluded to us. On the contrary, it is this positivity that allows us to be in the world despite the fact that our notions are rarely clear and distinct. Being in the world, at this point, coincides with an attitude that

could be summarized by two lines by T.S. Eliot[30]: "Oh, do not ask, 'What is it' / Let us go and make our visit."

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NOTES

[1] "Il n'y a pas de hors-texte", literally (and asemantically) "there is no outside-text" (Derrida 1998, 58).

[2] See McDowell 1994. For a criticism to this, I refer the reader to Ferraris 2000.

[3] The notion of "positivity" refers mainly to "late" Schelling's "positive philosophy": the whole of modern philosophy, from Descartes, to Kant, to Fichte and Schelling himself (in the first phase of his thought) up to Hegel (who replaced Schelling in the Germans' philosophical preferences), is therefore negative philosophy. "I think therefore I am", "intuitions without concepts are blind", "the rational is real": these expressions mean that certainty is to be found in epistemology, in what we know and think, and not in ontology (i.e. what there is). Thus, an abyss opens up between thought and being: a hiatus destined to be never recovered, as is testified by the history of philosophy of the past centuries. For the later Schelling, though, we must proceed inversely. Being is not something constructed by thought, but something given, that is there before thought exists. Not only because we have the proof of very long ages in which the world existed without mankind, but also because what initially manifests itself as thought comes from outside us: our mother's words, the residua of sense we happen to find – just like, at the Mecca, one happens to find a meteorite.

[4] As I extensively discussed in the first part of Ferraris 2012a.

[5] See Harman 2005, Harman 2010, Bahskar 2008, Bryant 2011 and, following a separate path, Garcia 2011.

[6] Proposition 1.1 of the *Tractatus*: "Die Welt ist die Gesamtheit der Tatsachen, nicht der Dinge", "The *world is the totality of* facts, not of things" (Wittgenstein 2002, 5).

[7] Rickert's idea that the object bears not only physical qualities, but also values, was little shared in the twentieth century, but it deserves renewed attention given the outcome of the transcendentalist way, that has been the mainstream of philosophy throughout last century (see Rickert 1999, 1915; Donise 2002). As suggested a hundred years ago,by the Russian philosopher Semen Ludvigovic Frank (Franck 1915), an intuitive and metalogical moment of "potential possession of the object" should be presupposed to the moment of logical knowledge. Otherwise it would be impossible to explain our knowledge of objects and, I might add, the fact that we have objects even without knowledge or categories.

[8] This experiment was proposed and developed in Ferraris (2010). The model of the experiment is, obviously, Putnam (1981).

[9] See for instance Giovanni Gentile: "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.*" (Gentile 1922, 1)

[10] Meinong mentions the round square in the first section of Meinong 1899. Here he does not claim that the round square exists, because for Meinong the round square, while being an object, does not exist. The specific passage is the following: "Nothing is more common than to represent or to judge about something which does not exist. There can be various instances of such non-existence: it may be due to a contradiction, as in the case of the round square." And then "the fact that representation may have an object even though it does not exists will seem somewhat strange at first sight; but on closer inspection, one will find that the nature of the concept of object is expressed with particular clarity precisely in this fact."

[11] "Here then are five ways of saying the same thing: "There is such a thing as appendicitis"; "The word "appendicitis" designates"; "The word "appendicitis" is a name"; "The word "appendicitis" is a substituted for a variable"; "The disease appendicitis is a value of a variable". The universe of entities is the range of values of variables. To be is to be the value of a variable." (Quine 1939, 798).

[12] The ω-reality is what Lacan referred to by saying that hallucinations are pure real, as not compromised with the symbolic; that is to say, the real with its autonomy and its structure, long before the subject's entrance into it (Lacan 1993).

[13] On the thematisation of social objects and social ontology as a whole, I refer the reader to Ferraris 2011 and 2013c.

[14] On the need to discuss this case by case (which is precisely the opposite of a maximalistic solution like "everything is socially constructed"). I refer the reader to my dialogue with A.C. Varzi in Varzi 2004, later re-elaborated in Varzi 2010.

[15] "None of us *antirepresentationalists* have ever doubted that most things in the universe are causally independent of us. What we question is whether they are *representationally independent* of us." (Rorty 1998, 86).

[16] As argued by Marconi 2012.

[17] "The time is out of joint: O cursed spite | That ever I was born to set it right!" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, I, lines 189–190).

[18] The first thinker that condemned the fallacy not to in relation to Kant but to Hume, was Reid (1783). His argument was resumed, this time also in reference to Kant, by Jacobi, who stated that when we relate to the world we do not make inferences starting from sense perception, nor do we ground them on the basis of categories (Jacobi 1815). Avenarius (1891) has the merit of providing a non-sceptical version of Jacobi's criticism: the attempt to

discover the conditions of possibility of experience systematically falsifies the character of experience, which is precisely that of immediacy.

[19] Jan Patočka has rightly emphasized (in opposition to Husserl's idealistic turn) our pragmatic approach to the world, which constitutes material categories regardless of the *a priori* / *a posteriori* distinction. See Patočka 1989.

[20] As it was defined in Meillassoux (2008) and in Gabriel (2012). Meillasoux refined his definition in his lecture at the Freie Universität in Berlin on April 20th, 2012: *"Iteration*, *Reiteration*, *Repetition. A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign"*.

[21] As I have extensively argued in Ferraris (2011) and Ferraris (2012a).

[22] I have dwelt on this in Ferraris 2001. Walter Siti has recently expressed the point in a very efficacious way: "Realism, as I see it, is the anti-habit: it is the slight snatch, the unexpected detail that opens a gap in our mental stereotypy – one doubts for a moment what Nabokov [...] calls the "*crude give-and-take* of the senses" and it seems to let us catch a glimpse of the thing itself, of the infinite, formless and impredicable reality."

[23] For the notion of "unamendability" see Ferraris (2013a).

[24] Following one of Wittgenstein's intuitions, I analysed this circumstance in Ferraris (2012a).

[25] See the new edition of Ferraris 2001 (Ferraris 2013e, 90-91). I present this argument under the title of "the slipper experiment". See also Ferraris 2013a.

[26] As noted by Külpe (1912-23), the hypothesis of something that exists independently of thought but that cannot be known (that is found in the Kantian theory of the phenomenon) can be rightly regarded as a contradictory hypothesis. Arguing that what we know are only phenomena and not things in themselves presupposes we have some kind of knowledge of the thing in itself.

[27] See also the "animistic materialism" proposed by an American new realist, following Bergson's evolutionary theories, in Montague (1940, written throughout the 1904-1937 period). See also Whitehead, according to whom the whole reality is contained in the self-organization of individual concrete beings (Whitehead 2010).

[28] As he wrote in 1974: "after all, there would have been transfinite numbers even if everyone had been wiped out by the Black Death before Cantor discovered them." (Nagel 1974, 88) Now, what would the evolutional advantage of transfinite numbers be? A neo-Darwinian such as Stephen Jay Gloud would have claimed that it is a collateral effect of a more developed central nervous system (which is an evolutional advantage *per se*). Nagel, instead, asserts that this is one of the many aspects of the world that Darwinism cannot explain.

[29] As suggested by Button (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.

[30] With the same lines I concluded Ferraris (2001).

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