

TRUTH AND REPRESENTATION: THE REALIST TURN AND THE PROJECT FOR A NEW

ONTOLOGY¹

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For my Grandfather

Abstract: What are the prospects for contemporary continental philosophy in the wake of speculative realism's rehabilitation of ontology? In order to answer this question, I discuss the fundamental reasons behind the rise of antirealist philosophies from Hume and Kant to the postmodernists and how they are addressed in the new realist philosophies of M. Ferraris and M. Gabriel. First, I point out why realist metaphysics has been increasingly linked to dogmatism in modern and postmodern philosophy. I argue that the many forms of anti-realism have their roots in a twofold quest, the desire to uncover and overcome the dogmatic presuppositions of traditional philosophising, and the desire to show the limits of instrumental rationality. Second, I sketch out the essence of the dogmatic-realist moves of traditional philosophy as established by Kant: in a nutshell, they consist in regarding the forms of representation as determined by the mind-independent nature of the objects of representation. The post-Kantian development of philosophy is largely influenced by this view of dogmatism as it gives rise to various attempts for overcoming of metaphysics. Third, I discuss how Ferraris and Gabriel resist the influential criticisms of realism by developing non-representationalist accounts of truth. In particular, I regard the pluralist tendency in Gabriel's theory of *Sinnfelder* as highly productive. Having in mind their insights, I discuss how the realist turn has the potential to oppose contemporary forms of dogmatism.

Key words: realism, anti-realism, Kant, dogmatic operation, forms of representation, Ferraris, Gabriel, non-representationalist accounts of truth, ontology, pluralism

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and Kant to the postmodernists and how they are addressed in the new realist philosophies of M. Ferraris and M. Gabriel. First, I point out why realist metaphysics has been increasingly linked to dogmatism in modern and postmodern philosophy. I argue that the many forms of anti-realism have their roots in a twofold quest, the desire to uncover and overcome the dogmatic presuppositions of traditional philosophising, and the desire to show the limits of instrumental rationality. Second, I sketch out the essence of the dogmatic-realist moves of traditional philosophy as established by Kant: in a nutshell, they consist in regarding the forms of representation as determined by the mind-independent nature of the objects of representation. The post-Kantian development of philosophy is largely influenced by this view of dogmatism as it gives rise to various attempts for overcoming of metaphysics. Third, I discuss how Ferraris and Gabriel resist the influential criticisms of realism by developing non-representationalist accounts of truth. In particular, I regard the pluralist tendency in Gabriel's theory of *Sinnfelder* as highly productive. Having in mind their insights, I discuss how the realist turn has the potential to oppose contemporary forms of dogmatism.

1. From constructing to deconstructing (the notion of representing) reality

The need for a new realism today prompts a discussion on the broader context of the development of Western philosophy. On the one hand, the history of philosophy shows us that in any of its epochs there are many incommensurable approaches toward reality. On the other hand, there have been various powerful criticisms of basic assumptions of metaphysical realism since the antirealist revolution of Hume and Kant. Both facts seem incompatible with – or at least impeding – the revivification of realism in contemporary philosophy and its ontological endeavour. However, the importance of the neorealist movements in 21st century should come as no surprise if we pay close attention to a dominant tendency in modern and postmodern philosophy: the growing scepticism toward the conviction that philosophy could be put on the secure path of a science². This tendency has its roots in the new historical circumstances of the 16th and 17th century, when the rise of natural science began. The marvellous triumph of modern

² Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Werner Pluhar, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1996, p. 20.

science has inflicted confusion upon the epistemic status of philosophy and its capacity to reach objective truths. In order to guarantee its autonomy, modern philosophers had to explain what were the obstacles that hindered the process of transforming philosophy into a science. In initiating a new antirealist programme in philosophy, Kant rejected metaphysics (1) as dogmatic because of its epistemological realism and (2) as therefore incapable of fulfilling philosophy's scientific ambitions. The refutation of the assumption that mind is able to represent or mirror a reality independent of human existence led to an abandonment of the questions of transcendent metaphysics as insolvable, but retained the possibility for a scientific philosophy that could provide a systematic foundation for knowledge. This view was largely accepted in post-Kantian philosophy, which sought to uncover and overcome the dogmatic layers of thinking. In the 20th century, Western continental thought not only linked traditional realism to dogmatism, but also portrayed it as complicit in the rise of instrumental rationality and totalitarian thinking.

However, what is the essence of the dogmatic-realist moves of traditional philosophy and why philosophers sought to deconstruct them? The critique of dogmatism does not start with Kant but he, as well as Wittgenstein, exposes a distinguishing feature of dogmatism. The essence of dogmatic operation consists in obliterating the difference between the forms or norms of representation of things and their objective nature. As a result, the form of representation is considered a necessary feature of the represented. Rules, norms and forms of representation are treated as rooted in the nature of the things in themselves. For example, time, space and causation are considered mind-independent features of the sensuous objects of knowledge. Similarly, the norms of the linguistic representation of the objects of speaking are viewed as a manifestation of their necessary properties and thus grammatical sentences are misinterpreted as metaphysical propositions. Accordingly, the nature of critical operation consists in unmasking the mistakes which lead to objectification and universalisation of the modes of accessing things. The critique of dogmatic realism promises to free us from unwarranted assumptions about the relation between mind, language and reality, to reveal new paths for philosophy and thought and to provide us with a rich apparatus of tools for opposing oppressive practices of thinking and governing. The main methods which they use to criticize the absolutisation of certain

practices and norms of thinking in philosophy, science and culture apply to different facets of this dogmatic operation. For instance, Heidegger traces the representationalist accounts of truth and thinking back to substance ontology, which continues to shape much of modern philosophy; Gadamer reveals the crucial role of traditions and language practices in making sense of things; Foucault highlights the historicity and contingency of the production of knowledge and discusses the interweaving between knowledge and power. In doing so, they not only oppose the various forms of dogmatism, but also seek to show the limits of instrumental rationality and the irreducibility of human finitude. But are their criticisms free of dogmatic generalisations? The postmodern radicalization of the critique of realism, dogmatism and metaphysics leads to relativistically oriented views of knowledge and values and to obliteration of the notion of objective truth: if we don't have access to anything independent from human thought, there are no facts, only interpretations. But this leads us to two options: (1) either political and social cynicism, or (2) relapse into search for secure foundations and traditional hierarchies. Obviously, without the difference between facts and interpretations human freedom is called into question. But it is also called into question if we cast aside the pluralist tendencies of postmodernism. Thus, the realist turn in contemporary philosophy aims at overcoming the antirealist modes of philosophizing without harking back to traditional realism³. It tries to answer questions such as, how to successfully revise the epistemological and semantic realism? Are incommensurable standpoints necessarily threats to realism or do they necessarily bring about violence? And can we accept the historicity of knowledge practices without accepting relativism?

2. Ferraris's New Realism and the Unamendability of the Real

By introducing his realism as "new", Ferraris⁴ begins with a direct rejection of the metaphilosophical standpoint that forms the core of the postmodern approach toward reality: that philosophy could keep its autonomy in the age of science and

³ For illuminating argumentation of that the best way to overcome both antirealism and old realism is by embracing pluralistic realism about representational practices, see Kanev, A., *New Realism, Pluralism and Science* in "New Perspectives on Realism", ed. by Luca Taddio and Kevin W. Molin, Mimesis International, 2017 (forthcoming).

⁴ Maurizio Ferraris is the initiator of the realist turn in continental philosophy.

oppose instrumental rationality by taking an antirealist stance towards representational practices. According to Ferraris, we should challenge the premise, which has dominated Western philosophy for two centuries, namely that philosophy has only two possible options: (1) either to be inferior to science, (2) or to criticise it, as in any case the knowledge of reality is a science's prerogative⁵. In order to do this, we should rethink the problem of the perception of the external world, since it could shed new light on the epistemic status of philosophy.

The line of reasoning of Ferraris goes like this. There are two layers of reality – epistemological (Realität), concerning what we (think we) know of reality, and ontological (Wirklichkeit), which exists outside our conceptual schemes⁶. The second layer of reality has a structured nature that foreruns our conceptual schemes and thus guides our thinking and practices. This is what Ferraris calls the argument of pre-existence⁷. He links the independency of the second layer of reality with the independency of perceptions from conceptual practices. Perceptions have a cognitive content that is not determined by conceptual practices. Thus they can resist conceptual constructions. Facts are not reducible to interpretations. However, reality could not only resist, but also oppose our conceptual schemes. This brings us to the next realist argument of Ferraris – what Ferraris calls unamendability⁸, the incorrigibility of reality. Unamendability characterises that content of experience which is not conceptual. Thus, experience has not only an epistemological but also an ontological role. The unamendability of the non-conceptual content of experience is to be traced back to representationally independent structures of reality. In this way, truth is liberated from anthropocentrism, since it is not dependent on the subject. Ferraris tends to adopt a broadly naturalistic perspective on the nature of objective reality. Nature is prior to and independent of cognitive processes. At the same time, truth is not to be understood as a correspondence between thought and reality in itself. In a sense, Ferraris proposes realism without representationalism. Reality resists and opposes our conceptual

⁵ Ferraris, M., *Introduction to New Realism*, trans. by Sarah De Sanctis, Bloomsbury, 2015, p.19-20.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, See also Ferraris, *Manifesto of New Realism*, trans. by Sarah De Sanctis, Suny Press, 2014, p. 34.

constructions without being mirrored by them. He endorses the criticisms against the view that representational practices can mirror reality as it is independently of them but tries to show that they are not valid criticisms against realism as such, for there may be non-representationalist kinds of realism. New Realism is to be understood as a non-representationalist realism.

Ferraris does not imply that we should suppose that no forms of reality are in fact constructed; starting from the unamendable layer, knowledge is conceptual, linguistic and emancipative activity⁹. Also, epistemology is not dethroned, but put in a complicate relationship with ontology, through which we interact with the external world. Ferraris simply argues that the real deconstruction should differentiate between those regions of being which are constructed and those which are not, and that the real task of hermeneutics is to discern the natural, ideal and social objects. This is important because, for Ferraris, normativity derives from the sphere of facts. The positivity of the fact is a condition of the possibility of normativity and hence of moral. With this move he protects the possibility for a different kind of thinking and for a delegitimization of the violence against the different, avoiding the realist-dogmatic danger of giving a set of universal truths.

3. Gabriel's New Realist Ontology of Fields of Sense

Gabriel¹⁰ opposes the antirealist tendencies in modern and postmodern philosophy by offering a different picture of the roots of dogmatism¹¹. He argues that dogmatic accounts of reality and its cognition tend to be monistic. The major weakness of traditional realism is that it regards reality as unified by fundamental principles¹². For Gabriel, to undermine dogmatism is to give up the belief that the notion of the whole of reality makes sense, i.e., that the world exists. There are indefinitely many fields of existence, which he dubs fields of sense, but there is nothing that unifies them into a coherent whole. What is common to all fields are few formal conditions of existence, expressed in the dictum that to exist is to appear in a field of sense. The

⁹ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁰ Markus Gabriel is the wonder child of German philosophy – he is the youngest chairholder in philosophy in Germany since Schelling.

¹¹ Gabriel, M., *Fields of Sense. A New Realist Ontology*, Edinburgh University Press, 2015.

¹² Gabriel, M., *Why the World Does Not Exist*, trans. by Gergory Moss, Polity Press, 2015, p. 103.

theory of fields of senses is the ontological basis on which Gabriel develops his criticisms of the dogmatic tendencies in philosophy, science and culture. Thus, he shows that many of the valuable insights of the antirealist schools of thought can be maintained within a realist ontological framework. For instances, the theory of the fields of sense opposes the absolutization of certain practices and norms of thinking by arguing that no field of sense can be fundamental, because it can exist only by appearing in another field of sense, and so on and so forth. This position implies that nothing is a condition of possibility of everything. Nothing exists in a fundamental way, i.e. there is not a structured and all-encompassing totality called reality, nature, world, etc. The key concept is that of sense. Its role is to make sure that there is no unbridgeable gap between thoughts and objects. Senses are objective modes of presentation and objects are bundles¹³ of such modes. Gabriel follows Frege in giving a non-psychological account of thought and Heidegger¹⁴ in rejecting any representational mediation between thought and things. True thoughts are not representations of objects but reveal modes of representations that are constitutive of the objects themselves. This view does not amount to naïve realism because how objects show themselves up depends not only on their mind-independent properties but also on the conditions under which they are accessed¹⁵. Therefore, the same thing shows itself in different ways for different kinds of subjects – say, people, angels and gods. This guarantees that we interact with things in themselves, but also does not grant us with a God’s eye view about the objective truth of things. Gabriel endorses a full-blown fallibilism. At the same time, he takes a pluralistic stance not only in ontology, but also in epistemology. Fields of sense cannot be reduced to other fields of sense. Accordingly, a theory of one field of sense cannot be reduced to a theory of another field of sense. For instance, intentional states cannot be reduced to physical

¹³ Kanev, A., The Realist Turn and the Nature of Philosophical Development, in *Method: Analytic Perspectives*, <http://www.methode.unito.it/methOJS/index.php/meth/article/view/110/118>, 15.10.2016.

¹⁴ See Gabriel, M., *Ist die Kehre ein realistischer Entwurf*, in: Espinet, D./Hildebrandt, T. (Hrsg.): *Suchen Entwerfen Stiften: Randgänge zu Heideggers Entwurfsdenken*. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag 2014, pp. 87-106.

¹⁵ Gabriel, M., *Fields of Sense. A New Realist Ontology*, pp. 81-82.

processes. The plurality of fields of sense requires a plurality of irreducible discourses. Thus, Gabriel's answer to both traditional realism and the various forms of antirealism is a deeply pluralistic realism.