

Realism, Ontology, and the Concept of Reality

Riccardo Martinelli

1. Introduction

In the last few decades, philosophers have been involved in an extensive and animated discussion about realism. As is well known, the word ‘realism’ appears in various philosophical contexts, e.g. in semantics, metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of art, political theory, etc.¹ Remarkably, in each of these fields, the word ‘realism’ assumes different, heterogeneous meanings. Being a realist in ethics, for instance, has little or no influence over one’s attitude towards realism in science, and so on. Accordingly, realism cannot be considered an all-embracing philosophical position.² To a certain extent, some forms of realism might show a certain “family resemblance,” and the various realists possibly use certain specific sets of keywords more frequently than non-realists. Nevertheless, different realisms cannot be unified within a single doctrine. Most of those who are committed to realism within a single sector of the philosophical debate would not consider necessary, or even desirable, to embrace realism in a more general, comprehensive sense. Though this is true, some philosophers still epitomize their own theoretical position as ‘realism’ – sometimes as ‘new realism’ – without further specification.³ This might *prima facie* suggest that they do consider many (or some) forms of realism connected, but this inference would not be correct. Rather, what self-declared realists *tout court* usually mean is that they are realists in metaphysics or – more precisely – in ontology. To put it in a nutshell, ontological realists usual-

¹ See e.g. French, Uehling and Wettstein 1988. The volume provides a survey of many aspects of the debate concerning realism, including moral theory. See also the recently updated entry “Realism” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Miller 2014).

² To my knowledge, at least, no one has claimed for a substantial linkage between the above mentioned independent semantic domains of the word ‘realism.’

³ See e.g. Ferraris 2012. De Caro and Ferraris 2012. Gabriel 2014.

ly assume that things that belong to the world “out there” do not depend on our thoughts, mental schemes, categories, or linguistic practices, and so on. From this point of view, the way things occur in the world is fundamentally independent of whatever people may think (or not think) about it. Rather than a philosophical insight, this might seem a commonsensical or uncontroversial tenet.⁴ Yet realists insist that many philosophers endorse the opposite view, and therefore that realism needs to be reaffirmed against sophisticated anti-realistic trends in philosophy. These trends are typically represented by idealist or nihilist thinkers.

One of the favorite polemic targets of the new realist wave is Immanuel Kant. However, Kant vehemently and correctly protested against those who tendentiously interpreted his thought as an ingenuous, rather than critical (or transcendental), form of idealism.⁵ Although a discussion of Kant’s philosophical stance is not part of this work, in § 4 I shall touch upon the fact that Kant never argued for anti-realism in ontology; rather, and more interestingly, he made claim to a philosophy free from ontological presuppositions. As far as nihilism is concerned, the analysis is no less interesting. Obviously, nihilists do not simply assume that nothing exists. More often, they try to challenge our (instinctive or cultivated) belief in the value of metaphysical notions such as truth, reality, goodness, and so on. Nietzsche’s verbal vehemence against the idolization of facts – as in his famous sentence “there are no facts, only interpretations” – must be considered within the context of the controversy against positivistic philosophy prevalent at that time.⁶

⁴ In her insightful book (D’Agostini 2013), Franca D’Agostini argues for the inseparability of the categories of reality and truth, so that (ontological) anti-realism becomes a self-confuting theory. Despite D’Agostini’s ample and well-grounded discussion, I believe that reality and truth should be considered separately.

⁵ See e.g. Sassen 1997; for a textual survey Sassen 2000. Kant’s early critics, Sassen demonstrates, were puzzled by a philosophy that, in Johann Feder’s words, “makes objects.” As is well known, Kant replies to them with his *Prolegomena* of 1783 and in the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787).

⁶ Nietzsche 1980, 7.60: “*Gegen den Positivismus, welcher bei dem Phänomen stehen bleibt* “es giebt nur Thatsachen,” würde ich sagen: *nein, gerade Thatsachen giebt es nicht, nur Interpretationen*” (emphasis added). Even the insistence of hermeneutics upon the inescapable circle of interpretation does not seriously challenge the world’s existence, unless one considers hermeneutics as a form of ontology – as Heidegger did, yet without

Still, realists are right in assuming that philosophers have often attempted to put a limit on naïve ontological realism. Some very typical problems with the postulates of realism are of the following kind: what is the real meaning of the claim that the things “out there” are independent of us? How are we supposed to know about them? How are we supposed to know about their independence from us? Moreover, what about ourselves? Are we merely part of this world of things “out there?” If we are indeed, what is the world of things independent from? If we are not, what about us as conscious or intentional entities is ontologically different from material things?⁷

In this essay I discuss some of the problems with ontological realism and the concept of reality. I come to the conclusion that, unless a positive and sound definition of reality is provided, ontological realism runs the risk of missing its own target. Claiming that reality “does not depend” on our thoughts, mental schemes, or linguistic practices is intrinsically confusing. Quite paradoxically, this merely negative definition of reality would be acceptable only in a dualistic perspective, that is, whenever one considers thoughts, mental schemes, etc. to be essentially different from the things “out there.” A negative definition of reality can be useful in some cases, but it eventually leaves too many questions unanswered.

In the following pages I will discuss some of the arguments in the debate concerning ontological realism (§2). I will then focus on the traditional definition of reality as effectiveness, or capability of acting (§3). Finally, I will attempt to determine to what extent this definition is helpful in the debate concerning ontological realism (§4).

2. Arguments Concerning Ontological Realism

Despite the realists’ own intentions, ontological realism in the above described form tacitly posits a dualistic view of the world, in which subjectivity plays a central role. A definition of reality as that which does not

denying the existence of the world.

⁷ Kit Fine correctly observes that “we appear to avoid the absurdities of skepticism but only by buying in to the obscurities of metaphysics.” Fine 2001, 4. As a solution for this dilemma, Fine sets the concept of “ground,” which cannot be discussed here.

depend on human thoughts, mental states, etc., eventually makes this dualism inescapable. On this view, things and mental states are poles apart, independent from each other. Ontological realists must necessarily allow for a particular kind of reality of some kind (call it “consciousness,” intentionality or anything else), from which things are declared to be independent: otherwise, the negative definition of reality would become inconsistent.

To resist this conclusion, the realist may add some positive element to the classical negative definition. Most frequently, realists appeal to perception, claiming that reality emerges from what we perceive. Having nothing to do with conceptual schemes, perception gives us direct access to reality. In this sense, realism also tends to be a reassertion of the independence of sensory data from further mental elaborations of any kind. Perceptions given by the senses – realists say – may be sometimes confusing; yet they cannot be always false. Descartes’ well-known doubts concerning the senses in his first Meditation may be attractive for arm-chair philosophizing, but should nevertheless be rejected, since they finally lead to skepticism about the external world (or, less attractively, to the Cartesian solution).⁸

Be that as it may, the argument of perception has two important functions. In the first place, it softens the negative definition of reality and turns it into a half-negative definition. Ontological realists still believe that reality is independent of our thoughts, conceptual schemes, etc.; yet, they concede, reality is related to another, non-intellectual part of our mental activity, i.e. perception. As a consequence, reality and perception are strongly linked together and, as such, they are independent of abstract thoughts, conceptual schemes, etc. In this form, however, ontological realism potentially clashes with scientific realism. Whether reality is made up of standard-size objects as shown by ordinary perception, or of subatomic particles, is a dilemma that cannot be eschewed.⁹ Within the sphere of the

⁸ As Descartes points out, we might be dreaming in this very moment, so that all of our representations would be false and deceptive; moreover, even if we are awake, an almighty and malicious god could make us erroneously believe that the world exists. Against Descartes, however, realists can still argue that in most cases what we see, touch, and hear, is actually what is there. See Descartes 1968.

⁹ For a survey of some debates concerning scientific realism see e.g. Leplin 1984. A

present discussion, the most striking difference between scientific and ontological realism is that the former positively defines reality, according to what scientific knowledge tells us about it, whereas the latter does not. Thus, unless scientific realism is explicitly embraced, the realistic position remains uncertain with respect to a positive definition of reality.

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the perception-grounded argumentation works as a deterrent against any temptation to define reality. Reality – realists assert – has to be perceived, not “defined,” as if it were a conceptual construct or a linguistic convention. In a sense, this is an essential part of ontological realism’s argumentation. The very act of requiring a definition of reality ultimately reveals an anti-realistic stance; by contrast, arguing against the possibility of a definition of this kind is a typical realist move. In other words, asking for even a preliminary agreement about a conceptual definition of reality is too strong a condition, that can be legitimately rejected by realists. Nevertheless, at some stage realists and anti-realists should find an agreement about the meaning they attribute to this contextually crucial word.

3. The Traditional Definition of Reality

Although it is not likely to solve the hitherto discussed problems, and despite the realist’s skepticism about definitions, an investigation into the meaning we should assign to the term ‘reality’ is a reasonable task within the general discussion concerning realism. As many other related general terms – ‘truth,’ ‘substance’ (or ‘thing’), ‘causality,’ etc. – reality has been the subject of innumerable philosophical discussions, which cannot be resumed here. Nevertheless, a quick historical look at some classical definitions of reality turns out to be a helpful tool for our present concern.

Within the modern tradition, ‘reality’ has been often defined as effectiveness, or capability of acting.¹⁰ In German, the word ‘*Wirklichkeit*’

discussion of this topic lies beyond the scope of the present essay.

¹⁰ See e.g. Trappe 1971 cols. 829-846. The double usage of the Latin word *realitas* gives rise, in modern German, to two different words: ‘*Wirklichkeit*’ (a term often related to modal logic, situated between contingency and necessity) and ‘*Realität*’ (829). Remarkably, the entry of the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* concerning the reality (*Realität*) of

(meaning reality) and the verb ‘*wirken*’, meaning acting, having an effect on something, share the same root. Germans also use the word ‘*Realität*’ for reality, sometimes with a slightly different meaning.¹¹ For instance, whereas many nineteenth-century philosophers use ‘*Realität*’ for the subject of our discussion, Hermann Helmholtz talks about the *Wirklichkeit* of the external world. For Helmholtz, things act (*wirken*) on our perceptual system, triggering our various perceptions, according to the specific nature of the perceiving nervous apparatus.¹²

Can the definition of reality as effectiveness solve some of the problems raised by ontological realism? Could an ontological realist adopt this definition, and with what effects? As we shall see, many ontological realists would probably resist the temptation to define reality in terms of effectiveness, since this definition diverts from a static ontology of things. Nevertheless, defining reality as effectiveness or capability of acting has considerable advantages. In the first place, it requires no involvement of intentional entities, so the above mentioned dualistic implications can be avoided. Reality is neither defined negatively as “what does not depend on” a certain intentional action, nor half-negatively as the counterpart of perception, but rather positively as effectiveness. Moreover, the capability of acting does not compel us to limit our attention to ordinary “material” things, that is, to regular-size objects suitable to bring about perceptions in a certain subject.

In a sense, the negative definition of reality can be regarded as a special case within a general phenomenology of effectiveness. In fact, the negative definition identifies real things on the basis of their capability of acting on a certain subject. Things somehow provoke perceptions in the individual, and those perceptions cannot be changed or influenced by the individual’s thoughts, conceptual patterns, etc. By contrast, the definition of reality as effectiveness does not entail any limitation concerning the individual upon which the effect is exerted. This has remarkable consequences.

In the first place, under this definition, there is no preliminary ontological distinction between subjects and objects, or perceiver and the perceived. Therefore, effectiveness could pertain to something, regardless of

the external world (Grüneputt 1971) begins with Kant’s Refutation of Idealism.

¹¹ See Trappe 1971 col. 829.

¹² Helmholtz 1903 (1878).

its being endowed, or not, with intentionality. With this move, some of the difficulties previously discussed are overcome. Secondly, the clash between ontological commonsense realism and scientific realism is – at least – softened. The inevitable alternative (either standard-size objects or subatomic entities) posed by these two theoretic options tends to fade and to give rise to a unified view. Whenever a certain effectiveness is captured, regardless of how it is captured (e.g., whether through ordinary perception or sophisticated scientific devices), we encounter reality.

These remarks are surely far from offering a comprehensive theory. My intention is simply to draw attention to a relatively neglected aspect of the debate, suggesting that further conceptual clarifications are needed concerning the very basic terms of the debate concerning realism.

4. Conclusive Remarks

Notwithstanding the above mentioned advantages, I suspect that many ontological realists are unlikely to embrace a definition of reality in terms of effectiveness. In many cases, in fact, what is at stake in the debate about ontological realism is not whether one is realist or not about the external world. Most people and most philosophers are indeed realists in this sense. Rather, the debate involves taking a position on ontology and its role within the body of the philosophical disciplines. Should we make preliminary decisions concerning ontology before we make any other philosophical move? From this perspective, the tendency towards a “new realism” actually corresponds to a revival of ontology as general metaphysics, that is, as a set of preliminary decisions about what exists, considered in its fundamental form.

In my view, one can embrace realism without having to subscribe to fundamental ontology. Needless to say, ontology is an important part of philosophy. What should be avoided is the scholastic idea that ontology has some kind of priority over (any or most) other aspects of philosophy. Formal ontology and regional ontologies undoubtedly give many indispensable contributions to phenomenology. By contrast, a general ontology implying dogmatic realism is much less attractive, especially when it is imbued with foundationalist pretensions. With this, I do not mean to

advocate any form of commitment to anti-realism in ontology. Rather, one should subscribe to realism without compromising philosophical inquiries with a preliminary subdivision of the world into kinds or categories (the more so, if this subdivision runs tacitly), or with other fundamental ontological presumptions. My concluding historical remarks concern the Kantian origin of this philosophical stance. Kant famously argues for the replacement of ontology (general metaphysics) with the analytic of the intellect. He famously claimed that “the proud name of ontology” must “give way to the modest one of a mere analytic of the pure understanding.”¹³ Interestingly, acceptance of this philosophical suggestion can be given independently of adherence to the other issues of Kant’s philosophical program. It can be true that philosophy should dismiss ontological presumption, without the second part of the sentence (that a good substitute for ontology is the analytic of pure intellect) being also necessarily true.¹⁴ Recent philosophical debates provide many examples of an ontological modesty totally disjointed from Kantian criticism. Some philosophers argue that the ontological presumption should be tempered by evidence coming from the field of psychology, or of neuroscience. Even those who don’t subscribe to this view may develop other strategies, nearer to traditional philosophical investigation. The conceptual analysis of the main terms involved – reality, to begin with – is surely one of the main tools available to us for these strategies.

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¹³ Kant 1999, 345 (A 247/B 303).

¹⁴ The problem of presumption and modesty did not come to a conclusion at the time of Kant. See e.g. Wright 1987, 25.

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