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A Brief History of New Realism*

Abstract In this paper I try to sketch a brief history of new realism. Starting from nineteenth century idealism, I then move on to discuss twentieth century post-modernism, which, I argue, is the heir of idealism and the theoretical enemy of new realism. Finally, I offer a reconstruction of how and why contemporary new realism came into being and propose a few remarks on its future perspectives.

Keywords: Idealism, Post-modernism, New Realism, Ontology, Epistemology

The fundamental claim of new realism¹ is not that what idealists take to be ideas are actually real things, like trees and chairs. In fact, any new realist is perfectly aware of the merits of a coherent idealism and is far from indifferent to the charms of a new and reworked transcendentalism.² The point is this: rather than an ontological commitment to the existence of given classes of beings (or, as I prefer to say, of objects), new realism is the claim that such ontological commitment shouldn't leave the issue of reality to science, thereby limiting philosophy to a merely educational function. In this sense, the way in which new realism understands philosophy (that is, as a construction and a system, together with a clear ontological commitment) is much closer to nineteenth century idealism than twentieth century postmodernism. I believe this is the right starting point to clarify the function and scope of new realism in contemporary philosophy (to which I shall limit myself for lack of space, thereby leaving aside its scope

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1 For an exhaustive review, cf. <https://nuovorealismo.wordpress.com/>. 'A specter is haunting Europe, and not only: the specter of "new realism". The concept of "new realism" was coined by the Italian philosopher Maurizio Ferraris of the University of Turin. [...] The debate on realism is now widespread in different parts of the world, and its promoters include the Argentinian Jose Luis Jerez, the Mexican Manuel DeLanda, the American Graham Harman, up to the German Markus Gabriel' (H. Kluver, 2014). The debate on New Realism has triggered almost 1700 contributions so far: 166 in 2011, 680 in 2012, 515 in 2013, 250 in 2014 and 20 in 2015 (see <https://nuovorealismo.wordpress.com/>). For the spread of New Realism in Germany see M. Gabriel (ed.), *Der Neue Realismus*, including contributions by J. Benoist, P. Boghossian, M. De Caro, U. Eco, M. Ferraris, M. Gabriel, D. Marconi, Q. Meillassoux, H. Putnam and J. Searle (Gabriel 2014a).

2 Cf. Gabriel, 2006. For the proposal of a transcendental realism à la Schelling, see my 'Sum ergo Cogito: Schelling and the Positive Realism' (Ferraris 2013d).

in fields like architecture,³ literature,⁴ pedagogy,⁵ art theory,⁶ political theory,⁷ social sciences,⁸ media studies⁹ and public discussion¹⁰).

Nineteenth Century Idealism

The twentieth century was a short century not only as far as history is concerned, but also philosophically speaking. At least until World War I, there were fully coherent and widely accepted idealist systems in the philosophical community (this held true for the English-speaking world and Italy more than Germany, which had been the cradle of transcendental idealism at the beginning of the 1800s). It is against such systems that, as we know, twentieth century thought set itself through what would later be called “analytic philosophy”. The *raison d’être* of the philosophy brought forward in England by Bertrand Russell and George Edward Moore was the critique of neoidealist systems and, specifically John Ellis McTaggart’s (1866-1925). It was a call for common sense and the ‘robust sense of the real’, thanks to which, to McTaggart’s claim that time doesn’t exist, Moore could object: ‘I’ve just had breakfast.’

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Next to this rebellious gesture, which would pave the way to a very influential philosophical current, something was stirring on the other side of the Atlantic. In the 1910s, six American philosophers joined the trend of

3 Cf. the conference ‘Neuer Realismus Und Rationalismus Eine Deutsch-Italienische Architekturdebatte’, Italienisches Kulturstudium Berlin and Internationale Bauakademie (Berlin, 15 November 2013). Cf. also: Fusco et al., 2013; Kuhnert and Ngo (eds.), 2014.

4 Cf. the conference ‘Les nouveaux realismes dans la culture italienne à l’aube du troisième millénaire. Définitions et mises en perspective’, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle-Paris 3 (12-14 June 2014). Cf. also the series of conferences ‘Realisms New and Old’, University of Turin (Spring-Autumn 2015). Cf. also Quaglino and Scarpa (eds.), 2014.

5 Cf. Corbi and Oliverio (eds.), 2013; the edited collection ‘Educazione, pedagogia e “nuovo realismo”’, *Pedagogia e vita* (2014); Special Issue on ‘New Realism and Educational Research’, *Journal of Educational, Cultural and Psychological Studies* (2014).

6 Cf. the conference ‘Speculations on Anonymous Materials’, Museum Fridericianum, with M. Ferraris, M. Gabriel, I. Hamilton Grant, R. Mackay and R. Negarestani (Kassel, 4 January 2014), and the series of conferences ‘Phantome des Realen’, Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, with A. Avanesian, A. Duttmann, M. Ferraris, M. Gabriel, I. Grant, G. Harman, D. Mersch and G. Schiemann (2014).

7 The political relevance of new realism was the focus of the series of conferences held at the Swiss Cultural Institute, Rome, in 2012, whose acts have been published in Riedweg (ed), 2013. The text has appeared in Italian (2013), French (2014) and German (2014).

8 Maccarini, Morandi and Prandini, (eds.), 2011; Martignani 2013.

9 See my ‘New Realism and New Media: From Documentality to Normativity’, (Ferraris 2015).

10 From 3 April to 3 July 2014 the German newspaper *Die Zeit* published a series of articles on new realism in philosophy, art and architecture, with contributions by T. E. Schmidt, U. Schwarz, B. Stegemann, B. Porsken, M. Gabriel, I. Radisch and M. Seel. Analogous debates have taken place in Italy (*La Repubblica* and *Alfabeta2*), Spain (*Revista de Occidente*) and France (*Philosophie Magazine*).

“New Realism”.¹¹ They were: Walter Taylor Marvin, Ralph Barton Perry, Edward Gleason Spaulding, Edwin Bissel Holt, William Pepperell Montague, and Walter Boughton Pitkin. These names are unlikely to ring a bell to the reader—which speaks for the little success of the movement. New Realism had no Bertrand Russell nor any Wittgenstein or Moore. In the successive phase of “critical realism”,¹² it had Lovejoy, Santayana, and Sellars (Roy Wood, father of the more famous Wilfrid Sellars), but the philosophical mainstream went along with analytic philosophy, which seemed to envisage a stronger break and more interesting new approaches.

However, if we want to understand what brought to New Realism a century ago (along with the realist versions of German neo-Kantianism¹³) as well as to early analytic philosophy, we should focus on idealism, against which they were set. Such task cannot be achieved in these pages, of course, also because neoidealism was very robust; it was endowed with an argumentative quality that post-idealist continental philosophy could not but envy (and a richness of content that analytic philosophy could not but envy). I shall limit myself to a small sample, which I believe is significant: the opening lines of *The Theory of the Mind as Pure Act* by Giovanni Gentile (1875-1944):

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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.*¹⁴

We must credit Gentile with the honesty with which he expresses his ontological commitment: only what is present to his thought is real, while everything else falls into the domain of the unreal. If this were true (unless

11 Holt, Marvin, Montague, Perry, Pitkin and Spaulding ‘The Program and First Platform of Six Realists’ (1910); Id., *The New Realism: Cooperative Studies in Philosophy* (1912; 2012). For a reconstruction of the origin of new realism see Marconi 2014, with papers by M. Alai, E. Baccharini, S. Bignotti, F. Botturi, M. Cangiotti, G. Cotta, G. D’Anna, P De Vitiis, C. Dotolo, M. Ferraris, V. Fano and S. Matera, M. Giuliani, L. Grion, P. Pagani and C. Zuccaro.

12 D. Drake et al., *Essays in Critical Realism: A Co-operative Study of the Problem of Knowledge* (1920).

13 In the same years that gave birth to New Realism and analytic philosophy, the neo-Kantian thinker Heinrich Rickert (1863-1936) elaborated a criticism of neo-Kantianism based on realist assumptions. Cf. H. Rickert, *Der Gegenstand der Erkenntnis. Einführung in die Transzendentalphilosophie* (1904), and Id., *Die Logik des Prädikats und das Problem der Ontologie* (1930). For an analysis of this path to realism cf. A. Donise, *Il soggetto e l’evidenza. Saggio su Heinrich Rickert* (2002).

14 Gentile, *Teoria generale dello spirito come atto puro* (1916): 3; *The Theory of Mind as Pure Act*, trans. by H.W. Carr (1922): 1. My emphasis.

you want to embrace a radically solipsistic credo), there would be serious consequences for our most obvious assumptions: those on which we all (including Giovanni Gentile) base our lives. In fact, if only our mental representations were real, then there would be no difference between introspection and knowledge of the outside world. All things past, from dinosaurs to the Sumerians, would be present exactly like the thoughts that think of them. All things future would be no less present than the things past (and therefore there would be no difference between possible and actual). Everything Giovanni Gentile ignored would have been non-existent; on the other hand, anything he thought of would have existed, including Pegasus. However, all of this would have ceased to exist with Gentile's death.¹⁵

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We might wonder how come a great thinker like Gentile did not see the blatant absurdity of his thesis, and the answer is easy. Gentile wrote almost three centuries after the *Meditations on First Philosophy* and 130 years after the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the subsequent Copernican Revolution for which, instead of inquiring into the nature of things, it was posited that we should investigate the way in which we can know them. In other words, Gentile had deeply interiorised assumptions that were far from obvious. The first is that we only have an immediate relationship with thought, which in turn mediates every relation we have with the world. The second is what I have called “transcendental fallacy”,¹⁶ that is, the confusion between ontology and epistemology, between what there is and what we know (or think we know) about what there is.

In addition to receiving the philosophical blessing of Descartes and Kant, this fallacy is also very natural. The psychology of reasoning has shown the theoretical deception due to which we are much more sensitive to the *modus ponens* than the *modus tollens*, and common sense has codified the confusion between what there is and the fact that we have access to it as “out of sight out of mind”. It is a very natural confusion, something very similar to the “stimulus error”: someone, after closing their eyes and being asked what they

15 “But everything is mind.” The mind is everything, the thought is there, near the stove, and it burns in the stove, it is fire (“... already Heraclitus, anticipating...”), it is solid wall. I'm thinking about all these things — I told myself — and certainly this is part of the mind; I remember the things that happened a while ago, or a long time ago, and this is also part of the mind. I'm almost falling asleep, the stove, the low light, the professor's words always so monotonous... this is a surrender of the mind, no doubt. Take my hands, here on the desk, are they part of the mind? You'd have to stretch the meaning of the word quite a bit. But then again, a straight line is a particular type of curve — although nothing evokes the idea of a curve. After all my hands move in obedience to my will, as directly as my thoughts, fantasies and other remnants of my will. The desk can be part of the mind even though it doesn't obey at all, you just have to extend the borders of the word: it is part of the mind, too. The same goes for the most distant and hardest things — let alone those postulated elsewhere and therefore merely thought of (Bozzi 1991: 110).

16 Cf. my Goodbye Kant! What Still Stands of the Critique of Pure Reason (Ferraris 2013).

see, says “Nothing” (while the truth is that they are seeing phosphenes, consecutive images, and so on). The subject is not giving a description, s/he is proposing a naive theory of vision: the eye is like a camera, so when the lens is closed there is nothing or, at most, perfect darkness. From this point of view, the *boutade* that Ramses II did not die of TB because Koch had not isolated the tuberculosis bacillus until 1882¹⁷ is an ingenious and epistemologically equipped variation of this human tendency to self-deceit and overestimation.

However, if we consider the metaphysical implications of this fallacy, we’ll notice that it entails a very strong ontological commitment to the existence of a spirit independent of matter, able to produce representations and, through them, things. Which is perfectly coherent with an idealistic framework, but is much less so within a postmodern one.

Twentieth Century Postmodernism

For much of the twentieth century, realism was marginal. A regional specialty, relegated to Australia, like marsupials,¹⁸ roaming marginal streets both compared to the analytic and to the continental mainstreams,¹⁹ or limited to extra-philosophical areas such as the psychology of perception.²⁰ Proposals for a realist epistemology, such as Roy Bhaskar’s (1944—2014) ‘critical realism’,²¹ appeared far less seductive than the anarchism brought forward by Paul Feyerabend,²² for whom all scientific methods are equally valid, or the fascinating theses expressed by Richard Rorty, for whom objectivity has no intrinsic value.²³ The idea of a “descriptive metaphysics” respectful of common-sense, advanced by the English philosopher Peter Frederick Strawson (1919-2006),²⁴ seemed a lot less heroic than the “deconstruction of metaphysics” proposed by post-Heideggerian reflection.

Should we conclude that, in many cases, there has been a continuation of nineteenth century idealism? In a way, paradoxical as it may seem, we

17 Latour 1998.

18 Think of David Malet Armstrong (1926-2014), professor at the University of Melbourne and of Sydney.

19 Gustav Bergmann (1906-1987), member of the Vienna circle and then Professor at Iowa University. His main works are *Logic and Reality* (1964) and *Realism: A Critique of Brentano and Meinong* (1967).

20 Paolo Bozzi (1930-2003), the last exponent of the Gestaltpsychologie rooted in Franz Brentano’s thought and in Austrian realism. See in particular P. Bozzi, *Fisica ingenua* (1990), and Id., *Scritti sul realismo* (2009). Cf. also C. Barbero, R. Casati, M. Ferraris and A.C. Varzi, ‘Bozzetti in memoria di Paolo Bozzi’, monographic issue of *Rivista di Estetica* (Barbero et al. 2003).

21 Bhaskar 1975; 2008.

22 Feyerabend 1975; 1988.

23 Rorty 1979.

24 Strawson 1959.

should. Postmodern American philosopher Richard Rorty (1931-2007) noted the similarities between nineteenth century idealism and twentieth century postmodernism.²⁵ However, between the two idealisms there is a fundamental difference. Nineteenth century idealism laid its cards on the table: there is no time, there is only what is being thought of, etc. Conversely, postmodernism followed a very different strategy. With Rorty, it suggested that reality's dependence on thought is "representational",²⁶ meaning that it doesn't concern objects but the vocabulary we use to designate them. Now, if by "representational dependence" we mean that the existence of, say, the Tyrannosaurus Rex depends on our conceptual schemes, then it follows that when the Tyrannosaurus Rex existed, paradoxically the Tyrannosaurus Rex didn't exist, as we humans didn't exist yet either. However, if we mean that the *word* Tyrannosaurus Rex depends on our conceptual schemes, then this is no dependence in any serious sense of the term.

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At this point, there is an obvious question to be asked: how is it possible that such dependence, which is at most epistemological (our knowledge of dinosaurs is what makes them relevant to us, or we wouldn't have known a thing about them), is passed off as an ontological dependence (so that our knowledge somehow constitutes the dinosaurs' being)? The answer comes from another American philosopher, but a new realist this time: Graham Harman. Harman has noted how the fundamental trick of postmodern idealism consists in claiming to lie beyond both idealism and realism, as well as beyond both subject and object.²⁷ Formally, the postmodernist does not assume an idealist or subjectivist ontological commitment, since she claims to stand beyond the distinctions between subject and object and between idealism and realism. However, by claiming that reality or objectivity are given only in connection with a subject, she surreptitiously introduces an idealist and subjectivist thesis. Harman gives some significant examples of this attitude: for Husserl, objects are always the correlates of intentional acts; for Heidegger, beings are always related to *Dasein*; Merleau-Ponty formulated the slogan 'there is *for us* an *in itself*'; and Derrida wrote that the difference between signified and signifier is *nothing* (which, by the way, proves it legitimate to read his cryptic 'there is no outside-text' as "there is nothing outside the text").

Statements like 'being that can be understood is language' or 'language is the house of being,' which have been the catchphrases of twentieth century continental philosophy, are just as many variations of the existential thesis that there is no subject and object, but only the relation between them. The revival of Nietzsche's thesis 'there are no facts, but only interpretations,'

25 Rorty 1981.

26 Rorty 1998.

27 Harman 2015. For a history of this, cf. Braver 2007.

proposed by radical hermeneutics, appears to be a foreseeable outcome of this mind-set: if there are only relations, then there are only interpretations.²⁸ We would be wrong if we thought that this situation belongs to the past. As rightly noted by Thomas Kuhn, a philosophical dogma persists until the retirement of the last of its proponents. In this light, it is not surprising that in 2015 one can still read what follows:

Against this new realism I have merely quoted minor characters like Erwin Schrodinger, whom I have already referred to in the past, for instance in my first *Krisis*. The new realists' approach is far from being knowledge of nature. The problem of great contemporary science, as well as of true philosophy, is the overcoming of the subject-object discourse. There is no subject and no object: there is only the relation between them.²⁹

Which is like claiming that there is no left hand and no right hand: there are only the two hands joint in prayer—unless you want to embrace a coherently Berkeleyan perspective, which would also entail a formal demonstration of the existence of God.³⁰ Australian philosopher David Stove (1927-1994) has called this 'the worst argument in the world'. To claim that we can only know things if they are in relation to us, and that therefore we cannot know things in themselves, is not different from claiming what follows: since we are the ones eating oysters, when we eat oysters we cannot eat oysters as such, but only in relation to us.³¹ This is a radicalisation of the worst argument in the world. In fact, if we are to believe that 'there is no subject and no object, there is only the relation between them,' then we must conclude that there is no such thing as a customer in the restaurant, nor is there an oyster on the plate—there is only an impersonal "oyster-eating".

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The passage I have just quoted is interesting both as a document and because it sums up several prejudices towards new realism (for instance, it confuses it with a form of naturalism³²) and in general attributes to it the straw-man thesis according to which the mind mirrors reality as it is. Obviously, new realism has never supported a thesis of this kind, and the reference to naive

28 For more on the relationship between postmodernism and realism, see my 'From Postmodernism to Realism' (Ferraris 2014).

29 Cacciari 2015. For an analysis of the language used in the debate on new realism, see Scarpa 2013.

30 To my knowledge, the only philosopher who took some steps in this direction was John Foster (1940-2009). See his excellent *A World for Us: The Case for Phenomenalistic Idealism* (Foster 2008).

31 Stove 1991. I have obviously simplified the argument due to lack of space. An excellent exposition can be found in Franklin 2002.

32 The insistence on the distinction between ontology and epistemology is what makes this hypothesis absurd. The relation between ontology and epistemology has been the focus of the conference 'New Realism: Ontology and Epistemology', within the International Conference 'Philosophy of Science in the 21st Century: Challenges and Tasks', CFCUL, Faculty of Sciences, University of Lisbon (5 December 2013).

realism and common sense plays an essentially methodological function in the new realist strategy: we must be able to provide explanations that account for commonsensical intuitions.³³ The price to pay for not considering common sense, in fact, is not giving up a sophisticated and demanding philosophy, but rather philosophical carelessness, catchphrases ('there is only the relation'), and an inflation of bad arguments that confirm the continuing validity of Hegel's saying that arguments are as cheap as apples.

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For instance, to say (with a bizarre generalisation of quantum mechanics) that the observer modifies the observed in any area and at any level would mean that using scales in shops is useless, as both the client and the owner modify the good's weight by looking at it. This simple consideration says nothing about reality, nor does it claim to assert (with a philosophical primitivism that no realist would ever tolerate) that reality is what it appears to be. Rather, one of the most relevant theses of philosophical realism is that not only reality is not what it appears to be, but also that there are areas of reality we know nothing about. This, however, does not legitimate the change of perspective implemented by Kant, who, noting the difficulty of knowing how things are in themselves, suggested that philosophy had to rather focus on how they should be made in order to be known by us. By doing this, Kant took the first step on a slippery slope whose final outcome is the argument that there is no subject or object, but only the relation.

The situation can be summed up as follows. Nineteenth century idealism was a coherent movement addressing the fundamental problem of philosophy: that is, being a thought accounting for the whole of reality. In order to do this, however, it had to hypothesise some role of thought over reality. This was favoured by the transcendental fallacy, that is, by the confusion between ontology and epistemology. With postmodernism things went differently: there was the "hermeneutical fallacy", that is, the confusion between the axiological relevance of something (language is important, history and the subject are important, but something even more important is to have a roof over your head and be able to cook lunch and dinner) and its ontological relevance. Language, thought, and history affect reality (who would ever deny that?), therefore they constitute reality (and this is simply absurd).

This is how a group of onomatourges has turned into a bunch of demiourges. If the worst argument of the world were true, not only Newton's physics wouldn't have been real before Newton³⁴ (there is only the relation between

33 See my 'Ontologia come fisica ingenua' (Ferraris 1998).

34 Which, notoriously, is claimed by Heidegger: 'Before Newton's Laws were discovered they were not 'true'; it does not follow that they were false [...] To say that before Newton his laws were neither true nor false, cannot signify that before him there were no such entities as have been uncovered and pointed out by those laws. Through Newton the laws became true; and with them, entities became accessible in themselves

subject and object, therefore if the subject Newton is missing then the object Newton's Laws is missing too), but the very objects to which Newton's Laws refer would exist in a very problematic way.³⁵ Note that this is the same outcome as that reached by Gentile, only it is far less evident.

In the analytic world, the realist intuition that a proposition is true or false independently from the fact that we know or can know how things are—that is, in my terms, the distinction between ontology and epistemology—has been strongly reasserted in the seventies by Saul Kripke³⁶ and Hilary Putnam.³⁷

However, the situation there was very different from that of the continental world. In continental philosophy, in fact, antirealism was political. Claiming that reality decisively depends on the actions of the subjects means (as explicitly proposed by Foucault and Vattimo) holding up the principle of interpreting the world and, at the same time, transforming it. No such thing happened in the analytic tradition that, as we have seen, was born as a realist and commonsensical reaction against idealism, and therefore never supported theses like those that “power” or “the subject” can constitute reality.

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Twenty-First Century Realism

As is now well-known, the term “New Realism” has a precise date and place of birth: it was born on 23 June 2011, in a restaurant in Naples. Markus Gabriel was planning to organise an international conference on the new trends in philosophy, and I suggested he entitled it “New Realism”. In fact, it was my belief that, after postmodern antirealism, realism was back to the fore. I exposed my theses on new realism in a short article³⁸ and a few longer pieces,³⁹ and a huge debate followed. The first signs of this could be spotted in three major conferences (New York,⁴⁰ Turin⁴¹ and Bonn⁴²), as

to Dasein. Once entities have been uncovered, they show themselves precisely as entities which beforehand already were’ (Heidegger 1978: 270).

35 Reality can very well be a thing in itself. This does not mean that this thing in itself has no effects, and mostly that it exists and has its properties independently of our knowledge of it. I develop this point in Ferraris 2015a.

36 Kripke 1972; 1980.

37 Putnam 1975.

38 Ferraris 2011a.

39 Ferraris 2011b and 2011c.

40 ‘On the Ashes of Post-Modernism: A New Realism?’, Istituto Italiano di Cultura, with A. Bilgrami, N. Block, P. Boghossian, P. Bojanic, G. Borradori, M. De Caro, U. Eco, M. Ferraris, M. Gabriel, H. Putnam and R. Viale (7 November 2011).

41 ‘Nuovo realismo: una discussione aperta’, Fondazione Rosselli, with M. De Caro, P. Flores d’Arcais, R. De Monticelli, M. Dell’Utri, U. Eco, C. Esposito, M. Ferraris, M. Gotor, A. Lavazza, D. Marconi, A. Massarenti, M. Mori, S. Rodota, R. Viale and A. Voltolini (5 December 2011).

42 ‘Prospects for a New Realism’, University of Bonn, with J. Babic, A. Bilgrami, P. Boghossian, P. Bojanic, M. De Caro, M. Ferraris, M. Gabriel, W. Gephart, L. Gordon, A. Kern,

well as my *Manifesto of New Realism*,⁴³ and the collective volume *Bentornata Realta*.⁴⁴ International reception was exceptional: suffice it to think that, as early as 2013, it was one of the topics addressed at the World Congress of Philosophy in Athens.⁴⁵ Such warm welcome shows that the time had come for realism also in continental philosophy. But why did it take so long? To answer this question, I have to provide the reader with a few remarks on the history of new realism.

When, in the early nineties,⁴⁶ I first started criticising the hermeneutical and postmodern environment I grew up in, I started from something that seemed to be unnameable back then: perception. In fact, if being that can be understood is language, and if there is nothing outside the text, then perception proper doesn't exist and has no autonomy: it is but the docile feud of conceptual schemes. So, recovering aesthetics as *aisthesis* has been the first step of my realism. The second has been to mark a difference between ontology and epistemology. The third has been to elaborate a realist theory of the social world. The fourth has been to provide a general realist ontology, and this is what I am currently working on.⁴⁷

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The first *annus mirabilis* of the history of new realism can be found in 1997. That year, together with the pamphlet by Alain Sokal and Jean Bricmont against the postmodern abuse of science,⁴⁸ Umberto Eco's *Kant and the Platypus*⁴⁹ came out, surprisingly (we thought⁵⁰) raising some perplexities with regards to Kant that were close to those mentioned in my *Estetica razionale* and in Diego Marconi's *Lexical Competence*.⁵¹ However, the general

S. Haack, D. Marconi, S. Poggi, H. Putnam, J. Searle, P. Stekeler-Weithofer and D. Sturma (26-28 March 2012).

43 Translated in Chile (Ariadne), France (Hermann), Germany (Klostermann), Spain (Biblioteca Nueva), United States (SUNY Press), and Sweden (Daidalos). Further developments of my thought can be found in *Positive Realism* (Ferraris 2015d) and *Introduction to New Realism* (Ferraris 2015b).

44 De Caro and Ferraris (eds.), 2012, with A. Bilgrami, M. De Caro, U. Eco, M. Ferraris, M. Di Francesco, M. Recalcati, C. Rovane, H. Putnam and J. Searle.

45 'New Realism: Philosophy in a Cosmopolitan Sense', XXIII World Congress of Philosophy (Athens, 4-10 August 2013). Graham Harman has held 68 international conferences in 2014 (and has no intention of doing that again).

46 'Ferraris [...] made the realist turn at an earlier and lonelier date than DeLanda and the Speculative Realists' (Harman 2014: ix).

47 For the main stages of my path to realism, see M. Ferraris, *Storia dell'ermeneutica* (1988; 2008); *Estetica razionale* (1997; 2011); *Experimentelle Asthetik* (2001); *Il mondo esterno* (2001; 2012); *Documentality: Why It Is Necessary to Leave Traces*, trans. by R. Davies (2012). See also 'Immaginazione come idealizzazione intraestetica nella Critica della ragion pura', (1993); *Analogon rationis* (1994); *Lermeneutica* (1998); *Goodbye Kant! What Still Stands of the Critique of Pure Reason* (2013).

48 Sokal e Bricmont 1997.

49 Eco 1997.

50 Eco, Ferraris and Marconi 1998.

51 Marconi 1997.

climate remained deeply antirealist. Jean Baudrillard had recently declared that the Gulf War was nothing but media fiction,⁵² while Richard Rorty⁵³ and Joseph Ratzinger⁵⁴ argued for solidarity over objectivity. Ian Hacking ironised on the number of objects (including diseases, nature and quarks) that, according to postmodern thinkers, are the outcome of social construction.⁵⁵ Malcolm McDowell re-proposed a particularly idealist Kantianism⁵⁶ and Karl Rove, counsellor of the President of the United States George W. Bush Jr., claimed that America, as an empire, could create its own reality.⁵⁷

At the beginning of the new century, though, many original and theoretically relevant positions have come to the fore, which can be (provisionally) unified under the name “speculative realism”.⁵⁸ In this framework, the pioneer was Manuel DeLanda,⁵⁹ but also the realist re-working of Heidegger’s philosophy proposed by Graham Harman.⁶⁰ Thus we come to a second *annus mirabilis* of new realism, namely, 2006: the date of publication of a number of books introducing topics that would be long discussed. I am talking about Quentin Meillassoux’s metaphysics,⁶¹ Paul Boghossian’s epistemology,⁶² Gunter Figal’s hermeneutics,⁶³ Manuel De Landa’s social theory⁶⁴ and Iain Hamilton Grant’s philosophy of nature.⁶⁵ Hence the major event of 2007, when the first meeting of Speculative Realists took place at Goldsmiths College in London, including Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux, Iain Hamilton Grant and Ray Brassier.⁶⁶ A second conference took place in Bristol on 24th April 2009. In the same timeframe, there started being talk of “Object-oriented Ontology”:⁶⁷ almost a resurrection of the theory of the object of the Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong (1853-1920).⁶⁸ Finally, an international conference in Paris in 2014 marked the encounter between new realism, speculative realism, and the realist elements of phenomenology and analytic philosophy.⁶⁹

52 Baudrillard 1995.

53 Rorty 1991.

54 Ratzinger 1992.

55 Hacking 1999.

56 McDowell 1994. For my criticism of McDowell, see Ferraris 2000.

57 Suskind 2004.

58 Cf. Bryant, Srnicek and Harman (eds.), 2011; Gratton 2014; De Sanctis and Santarcangelo 2015.

59 DeLanda 2002.

60 Harman 2005.

61 Meillassoux 2006.

62 Boghossian 2006. See also Marconi 2007.

63 Figal 2006.

64 DeLanda 2006.

65 Grant 2006.

66 Cf. Brassier 2007.

67 Harman 2010; Bryant 2011; Garcia 2011.

68 Meinong 1904.

69 ‘Nouveaux Realismes. A partir du Manifesto du nouveau Realisme de Maurizio Ferraris’, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (Paris, 4-6 dicembre 2014). With

The Future of Realism

But let's now come to the present and, if possible, the future. On 20th February 2015, a conference was held in Amsterdam, entitled 'The Future of Realism'. I was there together with Graham Harman, the French philosopher Tristan Garcia and the Argentinian philosopher Gabriel Catren; during the final round table we discussed, indeed, what the next moves of realism would be. The common impression was that there would be many different forms of conflicting realisms, and that at some point probably idealism would come back to the fore, but stronger and better equipped than its twentieth century ancestor. For now, though, there are three prevailing forms of realism.

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The first is negative realism, which embodies the dutiful common-sensical objection to constructivism and offers a minimal basis for philosophical work to take place.⁷⁰ It is an essential element to any serious philosophy and I have personally tried to grasp it in my notion of "unamendability". If the world truly were the outcome of conceptual construction, if object and subject were not to exist separately but only in their relation, then why would objects resist subjects so much? Of course, one could reply with Fichte's *Doctrine of Science* that an infinite I opposes a finite Not I to a finite I, and such answer deserves to be taken into account. However, unfortunately, if there is one thing universally shared by all forms of twentieth century idealism, it is the rejection of infinity—so, such position turns out to be unacceptable.

The second form of realism is neutral realism.⁷¹ This type of reflection is adopted especially by Markus Gabriel: to exist is to exist in a field of sense. For analytic authors like Putnam, Boghossian and De Caro, this field of sense is traditionally referred to science, to be understood in a non-reductionist sense. For continental authors like Meillassoux and Gabriel, though, it has a different characterisation.

For Meillassoux, sense is conferred by a reference to mathematics (in accordance with Meillassoux's master, Alain Badiou). For Gabriel, instead, with what ultimately amounts to a re-proposal of the hermeneutic tradition, sense is a character proper of human existence. This point is articulated with a wealth of arguments in *Perche non esiste il mondo*, signalling Gabriel's fundamental belonging to a Heideggerian reflection.⁷² My concern, here, is

A. Avanesian, A. Bellantone, J. Benoist, P. Bojanic, B. Carnevali, E. Coccia, M. De Caro, S. De Sanctis, R. Donnarumma, P. Engel, M. Ferraris, T. Garcia, M. Gabriel, G. Harman, I. Hamilton Grant, A. Longo, C. Malabou, G. Origgi, C. Romano and V. Santarcangelo.
70 Cf. Eco 2012.

71 Cf. Gabriel 2014b. The essay can be found in English ('Neutral Realism') in the already mentioned issue of *The Monist* on new realism (Gabriel, ed. 2015).

72 Gabriel 2004. The issue contains papers by J. Backman, J. Benoist, M. Bosnic, M. Ferraris, G. Figal, F. Fraiosopi, S. Fumagalli, S. Gourdain, I. Kara-Pesic, T. Keily and V. Palette.

that to make existence depend on sense is excessive. There can be existence without any sense, as our own lives can very well demonstrate. For Heidegger, existence and sense coincide: for instance, in his course on the *Fundamental Principles of Metaphysics*, he claims that only man has world and is a world constructor, whereas the animal is poor in world and the stone is worldless. However, Heidegger thus seems to forget that—leaving aside the wealth of the animal and inanimate worlds — a human being can very well be poor in world (think of the working class during Dickens' age) or worldless (the people exterminated in Auschwitz), without this meaning that s/he doesn't exist.

Finally, there is positive realism. This is the direction followed by Harman and myself. The starting point here is a very simple observation. We have infinite proofs of the coexistence, within the same environment, of very different beings in terms of conceptual schemes, perceptual apparatuses and skills. This interaction (in fact, this has more to do with action rather than knowledge) can't certainly depend on the hypothetical epistemologies of the beings involved. Since this interaction is not (at least not always) doomed to failure—as should be the case according to a purely negative realism—we must necessarily conclude that the real is endowed with its own positivity allowing for these interactions and, through a process of emergence, complex performances and knowledge.

As for me, I am working on the (I believe, legitimate) project of a transcendental realism,⁷³ no less ambitions than transcendental idealism. Summing negative and positive realism and overturning transcendental idealism, reality appears as the condition of possibility of knowledge. In this sense, positive realism can recover the tradition of emergentism⁷⁴ (thought as emerging from reality, as opposed to constructivism seeing reality as the construction of thought) and ecologism (the environment as the area of interaction of beings endowed with different conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatuses).⁷⁵ It appears as a general theory of the process of emergence that, starting from the organisation of animal life,⁷⁶

73 See my 'Transcendental Realism' in the *The Monist's* special issue on new realism (Ferraris 2015e).

74 The emergentism, i.e. the doctrine that entities arise from more fundamental entities to which they are irreducible (for example, the mind emerges from the brain and is irreducible to it) has been theorised at the beginning of the twentieth century by Australian philosopher Samuel Alexander (1859-1938) in *Space, Time, and Deity* (Alexander 1920) and by the English philosopher Charlie Dunbar Broad (1887-1971) in *The Mind and Its Place in Nature* (Broad 1925). It was recovered at the end of the century by many authors, including D.M. Armstrong (Armstrong 1997: 152–153).

75 In accordance with the perspective of the American perceptologist J.J. Gibson in *An Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Gibson 1979). Such perspective was ontologically developed by Barry Smith. Cf. Smith 2001, Id., Smith 2009.

76 Holldobler and Wilson 2010.

goes up to addressing the formation of thought⁷⁷ and finally normativity and motivation.⁷⁸

In any case, something should be now clear. Unlike twentieth century New Realism, which was born too soon, twenty-first century New Realism has strong reasons to expect a significant flourishing within its domain—which is already happening. Furthermore, it is historically in a better position. As I mentioned above, twentieth century New Realism was a less powerful and structured answer to Idealism than that offered by analytic philosophy. A century later, the situation is very different. On the one hand, analytic philosophy is being rethought and renewed,⁷⁹ which makes it more open to continental philosophy. On the other hand, continental philosophy is no longer contented with commenting on tradition (for which indeed there is nothing outside the text!) and is open to argumentation and ontology.⁸⁰

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On 18th January 1895, in Vienna, Franz Brentano held the conference ‘The four phases of philosophy and its present condition’.⁸¹ The idea was that philosophy goes through different and reoccurring stages. The first is rapid progress due to a purely theoretical interest accompanied by a scientific opening to empirical cases. The second is a practical interest, in which the inquiry into nature and the search of truth are motivated by social usefulness and applied philosophy. The third is skepticism. Since human interests are not satisfied by exclusively practical focalisation, there is a prevailing skepticism about human cognitive possibilities. The fourth stage is mysticism: a hyperbolic reaction to skepticism, characterised by the invention of new methods and by the discovery of new powers seemingly able to create new types of knowledge (and this sounds very much like postmodernism). But the wheel keeps turning and goes back to where it started from. Again: realism, praxis, skepticism, mysticism and so forth. One may think that this is a sort of eternal return, but it isn’t: everything comes back, but is not the same.

77 Dennett 2009: 10061–10065.

78 See my ‘Total Mobilization’, in *The Monist’s* special issue on documentality (Ferraris 2014b).

79 Unger 2014.

80 New realism has entailed a recovery of ontological commitment in hermeneutics. Cf. Beuchot and Jerez 2013, and Jerez (ed.) 2015, with papers by R. Cadus, N. Conde Gaxiola, S. De Sanctis, F. Arenas-Dolz, M. Beuchot, M. Ferraris, J.A. Gomez Garcia, J.E. Gonzalez, E.M. Gonzalez Lopez, L.E. Primero Prinos and S. Santa Silia. The Decimo Coloquio Internacional de Hermeneutica Analogica, held at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM) on 14-16 October 2014, was entitled ‘Una nueva hermeneutica para un nuevo realismo’. See my ‘Un nuevo enfoque realista a la hermeneutica’ (Ferraris 1014c).

81 Brentano (1968). An English translation of the text, along with an exhaustive commentary, can be found in Mezei and Smith (eds.), 1998.

Brentano was the last philosopher before the analytic/continental divide came into being. Things changed with the generation after him: the English philosopher Michael Dummett⁸² wrote that Frege (as a canonical author of analytic philosophy) and Husserl (as a canonical author of continental philosophy) were originally very close, just like the sources of the Rhine and the Danube, but their outcomes are as distant as the North Sea and the Black Sea (and, one might add, while the Rhine flows into a quite regular estuary, the Danube bogs down into a marshy delta, which might be a good allegory of many outcomes of continental philosophy). It would not be the first time in the history of philosophy that two philosophical traditions cease to communicate: in the eighteenth century there was a similar situation in many ways, since there was a fracture due to the abandonment of Latin as the common philosophical language. Ultimately, even if the only result of new realism was to overcome this schism, new realists would be very happy with that. And their heirs, be they realists or idealists, will find themselves with a philosophically more stimulating situation than the division that characterised good part of the twentieth century.

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Alesandro Feraris

Kratka istorija novog realizma

Apstrakt

U ovom tekstu pokušao sam da skiciram kratku istoriju novog realizma. Članak sam započeo razmatranjem idealizma u devetnaestom veku, da bi se prebacio na raspravljanje o postmodernizmu u dvadesetom veku koji je, kako tvrdim, naslednik idealizma i teorijski neprijatelj novog realizma. Na kraju sam pokušao da rekonstruišem problem kako i zašto je nastao savremeni novi realizam i dao nekoliko napomena o njegovoj budućoj perspektivi.

Ključne reči: Idealizam, postmoderna, novi realizam, ontologija, epistemologija