



New realism: ontology and epistemology

Organized by

Mario de Caro (*University of Roma 3, Italy / Tufts University, Mass., USA*) and
Maurizio Ferraris (*LabOnt, University of Turin, Italy*)

Introduction

Scientific realists buy into a positive epistemic attitude towards the output of our scientific theories. According to them the world and entities exist objectively and are external to, and independent of, us: world «is not constituted by our epistemic values, by our capacity to refer to it, by the synthesizing power of the mind, by our imposition of concepts, theories or languages» (Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 15).

Postmodernist philosophers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida and sociologists such as Bruno Latour, claiming that the external world is somehow, in different ways and to different extents, constructed by means of our theories, conceptual schemes, and cognitive activities at large, promote quite a different view towards the content of our scientific theories. Interpretations tend to replace facts, and scientific theories to become narratives in the same way as literary works. In such a scenario, what would be the role of science, and what its value? And what would make our beliefs justified? The dangerous consequence of such an attitude – whose apotheosis is the very popular Nietzsche's quote according to which «There are no facts, only interpretations» – is to demote science to a «mere cognitive style.» (Bereiter, "Implications of Postmodernism for Science, or, Science as Progressive Discourse", *Educational Psychologist* 29(1), p. 3)

Against postmodernism, philosophical realism is becoming ever more fashionable, on both continental and analytic tradition. On the analytic side, at today the situation is very different from what it was in the heyday of Feyerabend, Goodman, Davidson, Kuhn, Dummett, van Fraassen, and Hacking – as is shown by the growth of analytical metaphysics and of alternatives to anti-realism in semantics and philosophy of science. On the continental side, a New Realism is manifesting itself, contending that postmodernists' mistake was to confuse ontology with epistemology, what there is with what we know about what there is. The philosophical landscape is now polarized between the (mostly analytic) view according to which only natural science can tell us what really exists and another (mostly Continental) view according to which only an anti-naturalistic stance can do justice to socio-political phenomena.

The aim of this symposium is to reflect on this twofold scenario.

Program and abstracts

Introduction by **Elena Casetta** (CFCUL, Lisboa /LabOnt, Italy)

Realism and Liberal Naturalism

Mario De Caro (Università Roma Tre, Italy/Tufts University, Mass., USA)

Abstract: Nowadays we are faced with a dual, complementary one-sidedness. On the one hand, common sense realism takes very seriously the beings and properties of our everyday life but tends to do so to the detriment of the unobservable entities of science, which are downgraded to useful fictions. On the other hand, scientific realism, only accepting scientific ontology, tends to dismiss the foundation of the world of common sense. The unsatisfactory side of these two views lies in their respective negative components, which are dictated by the relative ideological one-sidedness. But why should it be impossible to reconcile the positive components of common sense realism and scientific realism, getting rid of their negative components, in order to conceive of an inclusive reality in which both the ordinary world and that of microphysics *truly* exist? A liberal form of philosophical naturalism seems, in this sense, very promising, as I will argue in this talk.

Can a Doctor Be an Antirealist?

Maurizio Ferraris – University of Turin / LabOnt, Italy

Abstract: Today it is clear—much clearer than it was in the last century—that not everything that is true is scientific, especially if by ‘science’ we mean physics: we are perfectly willing to admit that our current knowledge of physics may change, and that some of the laws we know will turn out to be false, while it will remain true until the end of time that Madame Bovary was called ‘Emma’ and that there is no colour that does not have an extension. At the same time, again if by ‘science’ we mean physics, it is not obvious that science systematically plays a foundational role, more important than any other practice or knowledge, in our lives. Things are different if we refer to a science generally neglected by philosophers, namely medicine: if a community of Ptolemaics can have the same laws as a community of Copernicans, it is very likely that a community convinced of the harmfulness of smoking should draw political consequences from this.



Fictional Entities, Theoretical Models and Figurative Truth

Manuel García-Carpintero – Departament de Lògica, Història i Filosofia de la Ciència / LOGOS, Universitat de Barcelona

Abstract: I will examine two parallel cases for which a fictionalist treatment is arguably defensible: the case of explicit reference to, and quantification over, fictional characters; and the case of reference to imaginary models in science and their components, frictionless planes and the rest. I will argue that an anti-realist, fictionalist reading of statements explicitly referring to fictional characters is more adequate than realist proposals. In parallel, I will be contrasting the fictionalist proposal about fictional characters with a similar view about the models and their components that many scientific theories appeal to, arguing also for a fictionalist view about them.

Are Gender and Race Social Constructs? Some Arguments for and Against

Teresa Marques - Centro de Filosofia da Universidade de Lisboa
Faculdade de Letras / LOGOS, Universitat de Barcelona

Abstract: It is widely agreed that certain categories—such as, typically, gender and race—are social constructs rather than “real” natural joints. There are different ways to understand social constructivism, but a plausible distinction is that made between causal and constitutive social constructivism. Causal constructivism is a thesis about there being *social causes* for the existence of certain types, facts or properties of individuals or groups; constitutive constructivism is a thesis about certain types, facts or properties of individuals being *constitutively social*. Constructivism is usually seen as an anti-essentialist position, but whether or not this is so may depend on which kind of constructivism is held. In this talk, I'll review some arguments for the social construction of gender and race, and some arguments against the social construction of gender and race. I will try to assess some of the practical consequences of endorsing causal constructivism vs. constitutive constructivism.