

A NEW REALIST APPROACH TO HERMENEUTICS¹

The clash of intuitions

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Diego Marconi has very aptly described the dispute between realists and antirealists as a clash between two intuitions. The first, realist, intuition holds that there are things (for instance the fact that there are mountains more than 4,000 meters high on the Moon) that do not depend on our conceptual schemes. The second (which Marconi calls “hermeneutic”) holds rather than even the fact that there are mountains more than 4,000 meters high on the Moon is no independent of our conceptual schemes or even merely of the words we use (“Could we really say that there are mountains on the Moon if we did not have the concepts or the words “mountain”, “Moon” and so on?”). Marconi rightly observes that the hermeneutic intuition might also be called “Kantian”, and it from this point that I wish to set out in this talk, aiming first of all to show what is wrong with the hermeneutic intuition and why, for reasons I come to, I propose to call it “constructionist”, and in the second place to illustrate the place that the constructionist intuition has within a realist outlook, thus overcoming the clash between intuitions and settling a perpetual peace between realists and constructionists.

The argument underlying the constructionist intuition, namely the fact that “in some sense” (a turn of phrase that is very dear to constructionists) even the existence of mountains more than 4,000 meters high on the Moon depends on

¹ For further informations on New Realism see M. Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo*, Rome, Laterza 2012, and <http://labont.it/rassegna-nuovo-realismo>

our conceptual schemes (or on our language), is of clearly Kantian inspiration, because it is an application of the principle that “Intuitions without concepts are blind”. This is the principle that leads constructionism to antirealism in three moves: 1. Transcendentalism: what there is (ontology) is determined by what we know (epistemology): “Intuitions without concepts are blind.” 2. Pragmatism: nothing transcends conceptual schemes, which are to be identified with our life practices: “There are no facts, but only interpretations.” 3. Postmodernism: these schemes are in turn determined by other schemes (traditions, texts, habits, customs) in an infinite regress: “There is nothing outside the text.”

It is worth considering what can have induced philosophers to take so risky (and troublesome) a path as constructionism. The hypothesis I offer is that, in line with the first move just mentioned, the whole thing began with a confusion of ontology and epistemology. For this reason, I have proposed to call the confusion in question “the transcendental fallacy”, in that it is at the heart of Kant’s transcendental turn which has informed much philosophy over the last two centuries. Starting here is thus not to take too long a run-up, though the fallacy in question has a prologue in Descartes.

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The transcendental fallacy

“It is a rule of prudence not to repose full trust in those who have betrayed us even on a single occasion”. Thus, in the opening page of the *Meditations*,² Descartes proposes to teach us not to trust the senses, those unworthy servants that, in his view, have misled us and that we would therefore do well to distrust systematically. Consistently with his starting point, Descartes maintains that certainty is not to be sought outside, in a world full of sensible errors, but within, in the *cogito*, the seat of clear and distinct ideas. This choice depends on the fact that, in general, Descartes demands too much, namely 100% certainty: “All science is a certain and evident cognition, and he who doubts of many things is no more learned than he who has never thought of them,” asserts the second of the *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*.³

2 R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) trans. in vol. II of J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A.J.P. Kenny *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (3 vols): Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, 1984, 1991. I develop this point in “24 modi per dar torto a Cartesio” in *L'identità empirica* edited by I. Bianchi and U. Savardi, Angeli, Milan 2005, pp. 138–46.

3 R. Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (1628) trans. in vol. I of J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch and A.J.P. Kenny *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (3 vols): Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, 1984, 1991.

It is still to be argued that demanding so much is the right move, given that, in the place of certainty, what we get is an incurable doubt: if we require experience to meet the same standard as science, we will end up not being certain of anything. The proof of this is to be found in Hume, who became a skeptic, just like Descartes, considering that inductive arguments based on experience can never be 100% certain. And given that, for Hume, all knowledge comes from experience, the real abyss is not between 100% and 1% probability, but rather between 100% and 99%, it follows that all our knowledge is founded on slippery terrain that offers no guarantee of safety.

The reasoning that underlies the transcendental fallacy is thus:

- (1) the senses deceive (they are not 100% certain);
- (2) induction is uncertain (less than 100%)
- (3) science is more secure than experience;
- (4) therefore experience must be resolved into science (it must be founded on science or, in the worst case, be shown up by it as the “manifest image” and a snare).

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Now, what is wrong with the fallacy? My hypothesis is that we have to do with a confused knot of elements, which don't have much to do with each other. In particular:

(1) the fact that I sometimes mistake a firefly for a lantern (occasional sensory error);

(2) the unjustified conclusion that, in that case, I ought systematically to doubt all my experiences, including that I have two hands (methodical doubt: I might be dreaming, I might be mad, I might be the victim of a deceiving demon);

(3) the fact that sooner or later bulbs blow (the empirical nature of objects: it may be that there is an eternal bulb, but I act as if there is none);

(4) the unjustified conclusion that the principle of causality, empirically founded on the law “if I switch the switch the light goes on”, should be regarded as a mere datum of habit, because soon or later the bulb will blow.

(5) Thus the fallacy undermines the primitive and unreflective certainty with which we relate to the world (I am certain, for instance, that the world carries on behind my back – but here I could begin doubting it), but it does not offer some other certainty in return. The uncertainty about knowledge – the ultimate unreliableness of the senses and of induction – is conceived of as freighted with ontological consequences, as if it were able to dismantle the structures of reality.

(6) For this reason, with what we might call an abreaction, Kant proceeds to adopt an apriori epistemology, that of mathematics, to found his ontology: the possibility of synthetic apriori judgments is the possibility of fixing an otherwise fluid reality by means of certain knowledge. Instead of founding science on experience, Kant reverses the terms and founds experience on science and in particular on physics. At this point the world is guaranteed by experience, or is so to the extent that it is constructed out of laws that find their origin in the "I". The transcendental philosophy transfers constructionism from the field of mathematics to that of ontology. The laws of physics are mathematics applied to reality and, on Kant's hypothesis, they do not represent merely the excogitations of groups of scientists, but they are rather the way in which our minds and our senses work. Hence, in the move that is characteristic of all the subsequent constructionisms, we must ask not how things are in themselves, but how they must be made for them to come to be known by us.

70 (7) This is where my basic claim comes in. Following and radicalizing Kant, the constructionists confuse ontology with epistemology, what is (which does not depend on our conceptual schemes) with what we know (which does depend on our conceptual schemes). These two things are obviously not equivalent given that knowing that a certain key will allow me to open my front door (epistemology) does not allow me to open my front door if I have lost the key in question (ontology). But his point is lost on those who assume as an unreflective dogma the idea that the world "out there" is a chimera, and that our relations with the world necessarily pass through conceptual schemes.

The problem is not negation, but construction!

In this way, ever since Kant, we have all been Junior Physicists and Junior Chemists, bent on constructing experience, just as experiments are constructed in the laboratory. This fallacy represents the path taken by the overwhelming majority of philosophers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To name one's own revolution after Copernicus, which is to say the man who – at least in modern perceptions – taught us that the Sun does not really set, is to adopt as one's point of view not what we see but what we know, and above all, to conclude that encountering an object and knowing it are ultimate the same thing. The consequences of this are many and, taken together, determine the stage on which the modern or postmodern constructionists operate: they make what we see depend on what we know; they take it that conceptual schemes are ev-

everywhere mediating; and they claim that we never have any relation to things in themselves, but always and only with phenomena.

It is worth observing a point that is central to contemporary developments in this area. Unlike the ancient skeptics, the postmodernists do not throw the existence of the world into doubt; they claim that it is constructed by our conceptual schemes, and hence that in itself it is amorphous and indeterminate. This is where the constructionist adventure begins. For, from this point on, existence comes to depend on knowledge, which in turn is a construction in which the world depends for its form though not for its matter on the mind. This explains why the postmodernists claim that they have never denied the existence of the world. Indeed, they have not denied this openly, if only because, with their politically motivated subjectivism (which is a particularly paradoxical form of solipsism), they studied such things as barracks, hospitals, the mass media or simply their own departments or their homes. They went no further than to say that the external world is smoke and mirrors until it is given form by our constructions.

What this amounts to nevertheless – for those who have identified being and knowing – is precisely a denial of the world, except that it is just a little more modest. If Kant trusted the construction to an impersonal operator, mathematics, things take on a different hue when, from Nietzsche and the pragmatists onwards, knowledge is regarded as determined by our vital interests, our aims and goals. It is at just his point that “Intuitions without concepts are blind” turns into “There are no facts but only interpretations” and then into “There is nothing outside the text”. What gets lost is any public and shared image of the world, or any chance of distinguishing reality from fantasy.

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The real is naked

But is this really how things stand? It certainly is not and it is not hard to cry out, like the boy in the Andersen story, that the real is naked, that is, it is not all dressed up in the thick web of conceptual schemes with which the constructionists suffocate it. This can be illustrated with what I have called the “slipper experiment”, which goes as follows.

1. *Men.* Let us take a man who is looking at a carpet on which there is a slipper; he asks someone else to pass him the slipper, and the other usually does so without particular difficulty. A banal interaction that shows nevertheless that, if the external world really depended even a little, not so much on interpretations and conceptual schemes as on neurons, the fact that the two

men do not have *the same* neurons would make the sharing of the slipper impossible. It might be objected that the neurons do not have to be numerically identical nor even by way of the relative positions of the synapses; but this not only weakens the claim but also contradicts a obvious and hard to refute fact namely the banality that differences in past experiences, culture, and brain structure and power can make for significant differences at a certain level and lead to disputes about opinions. But the slipper on the floor is another thing: it is external to and separate from us and our opinions; and for this reason it has an existence qualitatively different from what we encounter when we reason about the standing of such questions as futile medical care or preventive declarations of war. In other words, the sphere of facts is not so very bound up with that of interpretations. It is only when an evaluative element is in play that dialogue can be important: to establish that some behavior is legitimate or not, it is better to listen to a variety of opinions and talk the thing over; but to establish that the slipper is on the carpet, I look and I touch, and in any case discussion doesn't help much.

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2. *Dogs*. Let us now take a dog that has been trained. It is told, "bring me the slipper". Again, it does what it is told without difficulty, just like the man above, even though there are enormous differences between my brain and its, and its understanding of "bring me the slipper" can hardly be compared with a man's: the dog would not wonder whether I was really asking it to bring me the slipper rather than quoting the sentence or being ironic, while at least some humans might do so.

3. *Worms*. Let us now take a worm. It has neither a brain nor ears. It does have ears and it is much smaller than the slipper. It has only the sense of touch, whatever that might mean exactly. Anyway, we can hardly ask the worm to bring the slipper. All the same if, in moving across the carpet, the worm meets the slipper, it can choose between two strategies: either it goes round or it goes over. In either case, it meets the slipper even if not in the way that I do.

4. *Ivy*. Then we take an ivy plant. It has no eyes or anything else, but it climbs (this is how we express it, treating the ivy as if it were an animal and attributing to it an intentional strategy) up the walls as if it saw them; or it slowly shifts if it encounters a heat source that does not suit it. The ivy either goes round the slipper or it goes over it, just like a man, even though it has neither eyes nor conceptual schemes.

5. *The slipper*. Finally, let us take the slipper. It is even more insensitive than the ivy. But if we throw another slipper at it, it meets it just like the ivy, the worm, the dog and the man. Thus, we cannot see in what sense we can accept

even the most reasonable and minimalist version of the claim about the supposed ontological intervention of the perceiver on the perceived. After all, we could equally well not take the second slipper, but simply imagine that the first one is there in the absence of any animal observer, in the absence of any plant or other slipper interacting with it. Might there not be a slipper on the floor in that case? If the slipper is really there, then it must be so even if nobody sees it, as follows logically from the sentence, “there is a slipper”; otherwise we might say, “it seems to me that there is a slipper” or, more correctly, “I have in myself a representation of a slipper” or even “I have the impression of having a representation of a slipper”. Making the existence of things depend on the resources of the my sense organs is no different from making them depend on my imagination, and when I claim that a slipper exists *only* because I see it, I am really saying that what I am having is a hallucination.

Ontology and epistemology

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What does this experiment tell us? Basically this: there is no doubt that we do interact with the world by way of conceptual schemes: anyone who can read these lines must have learnt the alphabet and acquired a language. But that does not mean that the world is determined by our conceptual schemes. I can know or not know anything whatever: the world remains what it is. I can know that there is water in the glass, and that its chemical formula is H_2O ; or I can not know that: the properties of water stay the same. It is crucial not to confuse epistemology and ontology. Otherwise the principle “There are no facts but only interpretations” would hold good, and someone could say that Cardinal Bellarmine and Galileo were both right or even that the Cardinal was more right than Galileo who therefore deserved what he got and got what he deserved.

This is a clear sign that if we abandon reference to an external world that is stable and independent of schemes, then everything is possible, given that this decision will interfere not only with theoretical issues, but also with practical, moral and political decisions. The constructionist claims that if fire burns and water is wet that depends on our conceptual schemes. Clearly it is just not so. It depends on the fact that fire burns and the fact that water is wet. These are ontological features. One might well say that the fact that water is H_2O and that Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939 depend on our conceptual schemes. But from there to saying that these schemes are relative is a long step indeed. Because it is *true* that water is H_2O and that Hitler invaded Poland

on September 1, 1939. Or is it otherwise? And it is *true*, whatever conceptual schemes we appeal to that, a few years after invading Poland, he decided and put into action the Final Solution. Or is it otherwise?

At this point, the constructionists tend to respond by saying that facts and data are a myth. In less mythological terms, they could draw our attention to the way that ontology is suffused with epistemology. Which they are perfectly entitled to say. But to which I reply by saying that, while it obvious that *to say* that water is H₂O I have to have theories, conceptual schemes and a language; but it is not at all true that that apparatus is called for to drink a glass of water or to notice that water is wet and transparent. This second kind of experience is much less conditioned by conceptual schemes than what happens in the case of scientific research, in such a way that the Kantian claim that intuitions without concepts are blind is very hard to apply in wide swathes of ordinary experience.

In any case, precisely because the confusion of ontology and epistemology is banal, the theoretically interesting move cannot be to say that there is no distinguishing them (as those who think that data are as mythical as Pegasus would claim) but, on the contrary, to stress how and in how many ways, epistemology and ontology are to be distinguished. We may summarize these in the following table.⁴

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EPISTEMOLOGY	ONTOLOGY
Emendable (what can be corrected)	Unemendable (what is not subject to correction)
Inner world (= internal to conceptual schemes) Paradigm: <i>the conceptual scheme</i> . It is in the head but refers to the world	Outer world (= external to conceptual schemes) Paradigm: <i>everything that is not emendable</i>
Science Linguistic Historical Free Infinite Teleological	Experience Not necessarily linguistic Non-historical Unemendable Finite Not necessarily teleological
Social objects (depend upon conceptual schemes)	Natural objects (independent of conceptual schemes)

4 This reproduces, with minor variants, as do the other schemes in this chapter, those presented in *Il mondo esterno*, cit., pp. 89, 159, 160.

Emendable and unemendable

Let us proceed to the first essential distinction overlooked by constructionists and those who think that matters of fact are a myth: that between what is emendable and what is unemendable. As we have seen, I may either know or not know that water is H_2O , but I will get wet all the same, and I cannot save myself from getting wet merely by thinking that hydrogen and oxygen are not of themselves wet. In line with the slipper experiment, this also applies to the dog, which has different conceptual schemes from mine, to a worm or even to an inanimate being like a computer, which, without knowing anything about the chemical composition of the water could suffer irreparable damage if a glass of water were tipped on the keyboard.

I have proposed to call this fundamental feature of reality “unemendability”, which is the fact that what is in front of us cannot be corrected or transformed by mere appeal to conceptual schemes, as the constructionist hypothesis would predict. This is not just a limitation, it is also a resource. Unemendability tells us of the existence of a world that is external not only to our bodies (which are themselves parts of the external world) but also to our minds, and more specifically to the conceptual schemes with which we try to explain and interpret the world.

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Unemendability amounts essential to a phenomenon of resistance and contrast. I can have any theory of knowledge I like; I can be an atomist or a Berkeleyan, a postmodernist or a cognitivist; I can think, with Paolo Bozzi that what we perceive is the real world or I can follow the Vedantist doctrine that the perceived world is all false. What remains is that what we perceive is unemendable, it cannot be corrected: sunlight is blinding when there is the Sun; the coffee-maker's handle is scalding if we have left it on the ring. No interpretation can get around these facts; the only options we have are sunglasses and an oven-glove.

If philosophers have amply discussed the idea of a “background”, I would like to draw attention to a much less prominent matter, namely the fact that this background is often in conflict without our theories or at least does not constitute their obvious presupposition, given that experience can be discordant or surprising. The point is more important than it might seem. Science is, in Aristotelian terms, the grasping of *regularities* and, in empiricist terms, the *repeatability* of experiments. We find some of these features in experience, but we still have to take account of *surprise*. Something unexpected can always happen that breaks the regularity. The empiricists had understood how much

this circumstance is at odds with the image of science as regularity, and, as we have said, they found surprise to constitute an insuperable obstacle to the reliability of induction. Nevertheless, if nothing ever happened to break the run of our predictions, we would never be able to distinguish real experience from imagined experience.

But surprise itself would not be worth much if it could be immediately corrected. Yet one of the features of experience is the fact that in very many cases it is there and it cannot be corrected; there is nothing to be done about it; there it is, it does not go away and it does not change. This is what unemendability is and, insofar as it is persistent and not casual, it presents itself as a fundamental trait of reality. If we allow that a fundamental requirement for objectivity, including scientific objectivity, is invariance under transformation, then the same applies in spades for the independence of objects from the subject's conceptual schemes and from epistemology in general as an even more powerful criterion of objectivity. This is just what unemendability is: I can look at a fire and think that it is a process of oxidization or the action of phlogiston and caloric, but, unless I have asbestos gloves on, I cannot not burn myself if I put my hand into the fire.

Wittgenstein offers what I have often said is the key notion of unemendability: "If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do.'" But unemendability can be applied not only to the sphere of perception, but is manifest on a grand scale in the irrevocability of past events, which appears to be a necessity that we recognize after the fact. In this sense unemendability is perhaps the clearest and most powerful expression of material necessity.

Internal world and external world

My proposal is to locate everything that I call the "External world", in the sense of external to and immune to conceptual schemes, within the sphere of what is unemendable. The characteristic of this is that it includes not only or merely the realm of natural objects, as some people suppose, but rather the set of everything that is not emendable, and hence the physical part of social objects, all ideal objects and the sum of definitively true propositions. *Deus, sive veritas*. For, as I have said unemendability is not just a negative principle. Viewed positively, it is precisely the condition of the possibility of an External World, where unemendability manifests itself in the autonomy of esthetics relative to logic, the antinomy of esthetics relative to logic and the autonomy

of the world relative to our conceptual schemes and perceptual apparatus. Let us look more closely at these features.

The autonomy of esthetics relative to logic. Let us return once more to Descartes' condemnation of the senses: the senses fool us and we should not trust those who have fooled us even once. In this way, he treats the senses as if they were persons, with their own intentions, inclinations and characters. But the senses do not have intentions or characters; if anything, they show a firm tendency to disappoint, to not give us what we hoped; and this might be a sign of that very lack of character that is often described as a "bad character"; nevertheless, it is quite contrary to a will to mislead.⁵ Here we encounter the independence of perception from conceptual schemes or, to put it more positively, the existence of non-conceptual contents. These contents show up precisely in the traditional dissatisfaction with perception considered as a source both necessary and untrustworthy.

The antinomy between esthetics and logic. If it were true that thought constitutes reality, unless we were masochists, we would see only what we like, and we would never be surprised. Yet, whatever one does, one cannot help seeing things that he does not want to see or could not not see, even when they are things that he has reason to think are not so or are not as they are seen to be, as in the case of optical illusions (which are called "illusions" precisely because the eyes are supposed to be a support for science and the truth). I can have all the wild philosophical convictions I like (and, more significantly, I can have no philosophical convictions at all), but the senses will continue to do their work. My appeal to sensibility is thus antithetical to sensism: where the sensist promotes the epistemological role of the senses and regards them as a knowledge-gathering instrument, I promote their ontological value, insofar as they resist our conceptual schemes. It is from this antinomy that we arrive at the world's autonomy, its transcendence of thought.

The autonomy of the world relative to conceptual and perceptual schemes. Reality possesses a structural and structured connectedness that not only resists conceptual and perceptual schemes and thus establish unemendability, but that also precedes them. For precisely this reason, the concept of "external world" should be understood as "external to our conceptual schemes and to

5 As Husserl writes: "The not true, the not existent, is already eliminated in passivity" (*Analysen zur passiven Synthesis, aus Vorlesungs- und Forschungsmanuskripten 1918–26*), and this is thanks to the benefits of disappointment: "'Now I see that it was an illusion' is itself a mode of evidence" (*Aktiven Synthesen: aus der Vorlesung "Transzendente Logik" 1920–1*).

our perceptual organs". Such a world exists, otherwise we would not be able to distinguish knowledge from dreaming. I can, and in certain circumstances must, doubt the *truth* even of all my experiences, without thereby having to doubt the fact that there is something in general. We may investigate this with the third distinction.

Science and experience

There is a crucial distinction between having experience of something, talking about our experience and doing science (for instance, between having a headache, describing it to someone and formulating a diagnosis about it). In the case of *speaking* about an experience, and all the more so in doing science, we have to do with an activity that is linguistic (scientists speak), historical (their activity is cumulative), freely chosen (one may not do science), infinite (science does not come to an end) and teleological (it has a purpose). Aware that it is because they do not distinguish between science and experience that postmodernists have been able to claim that nothing exists outside the text, language or some form of knowledge, we may look into these features.

It would be hard to doubt the importance of *language* and writing in science as an intrinsically social phenomenon. There is no doubt that scientificness has to do with documentality, with a system of communication, inscription, attestation, codification, deposit and patent. While there is no difficulty about imagining experiences that come about without language and without writing, it is an indispensable condition of science to communicate and register discoveries: if "publish or perish" is an academic aberration when applied to the individual researcher, it is a categorical imperative for science as a whole, which, considered as a collective and progressive enterprise, necessarily requires written and spoken communicative exchanges and the deposit and traditionalization of discoveries. None of this holds for experience, which can happen without any communication, any registration or any need to be put in linguistic form.

The intrinsic *historicity* of science is just an extension of this consideration. We have science insofar as each generation can make use of the discoveries of all the preceding generations. Is for this reason that we can speak of sciences that are more or less young, by which we mean that they have a biography, a growth and a development, which derive from the possibility of inscription and documentation, while it is senseless, or at best metaphorical, to speak of "young experience", where this must mean youthful experience, what happens to young people.

As regards *freedom*, it is quite clear that science is a deliberate activity. At a certain point in the intellectual history of European people (if at least we assume the prevailing scheme, according to which science is not a universal form of life, though it may be universalizable), scientific activities took off and evolved freely, even if they responded to the pressure of practical needs. This genesis could have not happened, as we can see from the fact that other civilizations have not undergone the development of science and yet others have elaborated sciences different from ours. Again, the comparison with experience is revealing, because experiences are to a great extent constant across cultures and do not appear to be the upshot of deliberate choice. I am referring not only to perception, once we have got over the legends that suppose that the Inuit see more shades of white than we do. I have in mind strongly structured elements, such as myths and the basic family relations. In short, what is universal to humans is not science (which is merely universalizable), but experience.

Proceeding then to *infinity*, the most prestigious sciences are precisely those that can boast a long past and have before them a long future, which is to say that they respond most closely to the idea of knowledge as unending development. Nothing of the kind can be said of experience, which not only does not project itself as infinite (after all, it cannot last longer than a human life), but it is not even progressive. By this I mean not only that the project of refining the senses makes little sense (at most we can remedy defects, with eyeglasses and hearing aids), but also that the idea of progress makes very little sense in relation to the practices and the techniques of lived life. While everyone would prefer to be treated by a doctor of 2211 rather than one of 2011 and would be terrified of the treatments – especially the surgery – of a doctor of 1811, the prospect of eating the bread of yesteryear or wearing unglobalized textiles might be rather attractive. Furthermore, while the idea of unending progress in the sciences is fairly uncontroversial, it is hardly more than a poor joke to think of infinite development of new techniques for doing up one's shoe laces, knotting one's tie or making one's bed.

Finally, regarding *teleology*, the point is very simple. Science is a deliberate activity and in this is like many techniques, which in turn are a half-way house between science and experience: making one's bed does not seem an activity that can make infinite progress (at most, elasticated sheets make a step forward), though it is certainly deliberate. And this goes all the more for science. Someone who went to a laboratory without an end in view would have difficulty doing science, while someone who without a motive feels a sensation of heat, sees a certain color or has a toothache would have no reason for denying

that those were his experiences. And though the history of science loves the serendipity of someone who has basic intuitions in the bath or under an apple tree, when we move from folklore to evaluation, intentionality comes to count heavily. Typically, Fleming's discovery of penicillin, which was in large part luck because of a mold that grew in refrigerator that had been left open, seems like a less meritorious discovery because less deliberate than others.

Social objects and natural objects

80 All three of the differences that I have highlighted and that follow from the distinction between ontology and epistemology tend to show the fundamental misunderstanding in constructionism: thinking that reality has no form without the action of conceptual construction and that the given is a myth. But there is an obvious commonsensical objection: am I wanting to deny that, for instance, a cadastral tax is socially constructed? Or, worse, am I wanting to say that the cadastral tax is unemendable in the relevant offices? Obviously not. The distinction I have proposed aim at avoiding the two complementary sillinesses of saying that nothing, not even a cadastral tax, is socially constructed, and that everything, including tuberculosis, is socially constructed, this latter being the claim, if taken seriously, would suggest that we suspend medical research, given that we have already discovered quite enough diseases. Within the distinction between ontology and epistemology, then, there appears to lurk a fourth distinction that the postmodernists (unlike their constructionist predecessors) have not drawn, and in the absence of which everything is topsy-turvy, given that it is the premise for postmodernism's wildest and most extreme claims.

The distinction I have in mind is that between social objects and natural objects. The former, unlike the latter, are *constitutively* subject to the action of epistemology, because things like marriages and debts exist only because there are persons who know that they do. There is an essential difference between being ill and not knowing it (even if we do not know, the disease takes its course) and being married and not knowing it (if we do not know, and nor does anyone else, then it is exactly like not being married at all). This is another of the typical omissions of the postmodernists, who are so ready to think that nothing exists outside the text. Likewise no one, not even an old-style or new-style realist would want to deny that reality is constructed when it comes to preparing a courtroom oration. But to suppose that the reality to which the speech refers is constructed or conversely that it is not constructed, but never-

theless need not be taken into consideration in fabricating the oration, would be a philosophical justification of lying.

Here is my suggestion: unemendability is the salient feature of natural objects, but we have to think of a different family of objects and draw a distinction that hermeneutics has overlooked with disastrous consequences. It is not enough to distinguish ontology from epistemology; we must furthermore distinguish within ontology as a theory of objects at least three classes:

1. natural objects, which occupy positions in space and in time and do not depend on subjects;
2. social objects, which do occupy a positions in space and in time and do depend on subjects, though they are not themselves subjective;
3. ideal objects, which do not occupy any position either in space or in time and do not depend on subjects.

With this in hand, it is no longer sustainable that natural reality is constructed by scientists' theories, as the postmodernists claim. It also becomes very difficult to assert that without conceptual schemes we have no relation to the physical world, as the less extreme philosophers have claimed, not considering that, unlike social objects, natural objects exist independently of subjects and hence of conceptual schemes.

Nevertheless it becomes possible to pick out a field in which conceptual schemes and epistemology impose their necessity, namely the world of social objects. As to the role of conceptual schemes, I would like to stress that, in the social world, any experience whatever is impossible without conceptual schemes and more or less elaborate theories. Consider these two propositions:

Mountains, lakes, beavers and asteroids depend on our conceptual schemes; and

Bank notes, diplomas, debts, prizes and punishments depend on our conceptual schemes.

To claim that mountains and rivers are thus and so because there are humans that have sense organs made in a certain way and categories of a certain sort calls for a certain courage. In point of fact, mountains and rivers are what they are all on their own, and, if anything, are *known* by us through the specific forms of our senses and our intellect.⁶

6 For sure, a particularly subtle philosophy might want to re-write (1) as the proposition: "The fact that mountains, lakes, beavers and asteroids are subsumed under the concept (ontological category) of *objects* depends on our conceptual schemes". But in either case there is the collapse of being on knowing, because at this point one may as well re-write (1) as "The fact that mountains, lakes, beavers and asteroids are subsumed under the concept

Let us now put the matter in terms of social objects. For sure someone might say that marriages and divorces, mortgages and chess games, debts and seats in parliament are thus and so because our (human) senses and our intellect are made in a certain way. And this would not be a surprising thing to say. We can be reasonably sure that, for a beaver, there are no mortgages or divorces, though there are mountains and lakes.

Once we have recognized the distinction between ontology and epistemology, and that among the classes of objects, the way is open to the rehabilitation of the Kantian intuition in a sphere different from the one that it was invented for, namely in connection with social objects. The basic idea is that the claim “intuitions without concepts are blind”, which we have seen is hard to apply to the natural world, gives a splendid account of our relations with the social world, which is made of such things as money, roles and institutions, which exist only because we believe that they do

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As we have seen, social objects depend necessarily on subjects and in this framework, we elaborate the constitutive law: *Object = Inscribed Act*, which implies of necessity the intervention of subjects, of acts and of intuitions endowed with concepts. What I propose is thus a weak textualism, insofar as it assumes that inscriptions are decisive in the construction of social reality but – unlike what I call “strong textualism” – it does not entail that inscriptions are constitutive of reality in general. Weak textualism is therefore a weakening of Derrida’s thesis that “there is nothing outside the text”, which is transformed into “there is nothing *social* outside the text”. This allows a sort of constructionism, but only a moderate version of it, which is not in conflict with the realist intuition. In conclusion, I would like to highlight how this approach leads to what I would call “peace between the intuitions”, a settlement that allows for a perpetual peace between the constructionist and the realist intuitions, giving to each its due sphere of competence.

Treaty of perpetual peace

The treaty can be summarized in six points, as follows.

Natural objects are independent of epistemology and are what the natural sciences are true of.

Experience is independent of science.

(ontological category) of *objects* depends on the fact that there is someone about”. In one sense, this is true enough, but it is irrelevant to the ontology of mountains, lakes, beavers and asteroids.

Science is different from magic (and in particular is more true).

Social objects depend on epistemology without being on that account subjective.

“Intuitions without concepts are blind” holds in the first instance for social objects (where it has a constructive value) and in the second for an epistemological approach to the natural world (where it has a reconstructive value)

The realist intuition and the constructionist intuition thus have equal legitimacy, each in its own realm of application.

There may of course be border disputes, typically in ethically and politically sensitive cases, such as the beginning or end of life, or human rights. But the most effective way to block any negotiation is by embracing pan-constructivism. This is what history teaches: Feyerabend is Ratzinger’s closest ally in line with an implacable law of politics which, by the way, teaches that even in the field of human affairs we have to do with astonishing regularities.