

REALISM WITHOUT REALITY?

EDITORIAL

In recent months, the philosophical and political debates have been characterized by an exorbitant frequency of the term “realism.” As usual, the suffix “-ism” is used to indicate “doctrines or attitudes’ (*realism, heroism, ...*) or ‘physical or moral qualities or affections’ (*alcoholism, ... egoism*).”¹ The case is in fact that of a debate concerning the *attitude* that one should have with respect to reality. First of all, reality is to be taken seriously, it is an inescapable given with which we must come to terms. Amanda Berry, the young woman from Cleveland, was *really* kidnapped and kept captive with the other women for ten years. Unfortunately, this is not a product of the imagination.

With this though, we have not yet said anything, or anything explicit, on *what* reality *is*. The news regarding Amanda Berry are immediately understood by all of us as terrible because all (or almost all) of us share an interpretation of the human being as of a person who is born free, is worthy of dignity and respect, and is not to be treated as a means. If this were not the case, such a thing as “kidnapping” would not exist. No one would ever dream of saying that a stone has been kidnapped; this is because we draw an ontological distinction between a woman and a stone (an *ontological* distinction, which means that it is not a matter of a *cultural construct*).

Realism always implies an interpretation. Following up on Aristotle’s distinction, in order to take something seriously one needs to know not only *that* things are in a certain way, but also *what* the things that are in a certain way *are*. Heidegger’s ontological difference has perhaps been understood too hastily as a divarication between the sheer facts (beings) and the light in which facts are considered (the historical interpretations). On the one side are the clothings (being); on the other side is naked reality. Yet such ontology of facts has already pre-judged, without thematization, that there is no light of things (or in things): clothes are a mere exteriority that can be taken off or changed at any moment. “The “supplement” has thus revealed itself to be (unlike what were perhaps Derrida’s intentions) not a modality of reality itself (*est modus in rebus*, there is a way in things, and not simply in Aristotle’s sense of moderation), a grammatological genome at the heart of reality as such; rather, it has been declassified to feature of a region of being, the one that depends on human intentions.

As attitude, realism recalls the importance of a subjectivity that is pure and attentive to the givenness of things. Realism is thus a subjectivism whose aim is to let the essence of things emerge. Yet such essence gives itself only in an interpretation which, far from

¹ G. DEVOTO and G.C. OLI, *Il dizionario della lingua italiana, ad vocem*. The same holds in English. The suffix “-ism” always indicates a prevailing of subjectivity. In fact, it designates “a political belief or religion based on a particular principle or the ideas and beliefs of a particular person” as well as “the action process of doing something,” “the state of ... having a particular quality,” etc. See *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, ad vocem*.

violating facts, accepts the responsibility of naming things for what they are, taking up the risk of giving them an incorrect name that does not correspond to the essence of reality.

This risk, which is always faced with the possibility of failure, is called “philosophy.” It is certainly an inescapable fact that there are children-soldiers. Yet a superior form of realism cannot stop at stating such a fact and not also add that in fact there should not be children-soldiers; that is, that the nature of the human being is such as to exclude children-soldierness or at least immediately to qualify it as depravation.

Saying that realism needs interpretation means to say that the look through which we view things may be right or wrong, and that things demand to be viewed in a certain way. Describing reality without its own mode does not seem possible. A realism that ignores the intrinsic mode either is propedeutic to philosophy (assuming that a philosophical propedeutics exists, which is something that many important philosophers would doubt) or is bad philosophy.

This issue of *SpazioFilosofico* is concerned not with “realism” but with reality. The debate on old and new realism is here simply taken as an occasion to re-propose one of the most classic philosophical questions: What is reality? What is being?

In a very broad sense, realism is the attitude of those who are not willing to betray reality or turn their back to being. In order not to betray something, it is important to know or try to say what it is that one wishes not to betray.

In this sense, there is no philosophy that is not realist, and philosophy can be described as a conflict concerning the most appropriate name one should give to reality.

In the generally Aristotelian climate of the end of the twentieth century and, by *inertia*, of the first ten years of this new millennium, the question regarding reality seems for the most part to take up a cataloguing mode. One talks about reality only by distinguishing realms, levels, and systems of reality. The danger of grammatical category mistakes, of attributing features of one level to another level dissuades those who are prudent from risking an overall denomination of the object “reality.”

Alternatively, the new and old reductivistic metaphysics embarks in the venture of a scientific Parmenideanism in which the physicalist level is the only one that truly exists whereas those others that are distinct from it are ultimately just appearances.

More attentive to the givenness of things, phenomenology engages in the meritorious project of a description of the world that may disclose its inexhaustible richness. Poverty itself becomes part of such richness, and phenomenology’s weak point seems to be found precisely in such luxurious tendency that turns everything it touches into gold without having truly decided that “gold” is the appropriate name for reality, the ultimate name of reality.

Less widespread or inexistent today is the—properly speculative—activity of giving names to things. The crisis of philosophy is also and moreover a crisis of confidence in the meaningfulness of such Adamitic activity of naming. It is as if, because they are invented, by the same token philosophical names for reality such as “being” or “*causa sui*” were disqualified as un-realist.

The major trends in the Western philosophical tradition seem to be characterized by the idea that only an invented name (“being”: *il n’existe pas*) can express the “essence” (if there is one) of “reality” (that obviously no one has ever seen). How and why invention,

concept, and in some cases even interpretation are indispensable for reality is a question that will not leave the debate too soon.

It is appropriate, we think, to ask again what “reality” is, whether the various terms used to express it (such as, in German, *Wirklichkeit*, *Realität*, etc.) say something essential about it, and ultimately what we are loyal to when we are faithful to reality. The conflict about reality seems to be a conflict concerning loyalty and betrayal. Like all similar conflicts, it is a violent conflict in the sense of its being irreducible and ultimate. This fits the serious spirit of the time well.

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(Translated by Silvia Benso)