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GET REAL! EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION*

It would be difficult to find a vaguer philosophical term than ‘realism’. It appears in theory of knowledge and metaphysics (where it is the most common), metaethics, the philosophy of science, aesthetics, and the history of philosophy, constantly changing its meaning while becoming intertwined with other philosophical terms and many—sometimes starkly different—philosophical ideas. In effect, anyone who uses the word is asking for trouble. Is this not reason enough to abandon it, or at least replace it with something less ambiguous? While this solution (cutting the Gordian knot) may be the easiest one, it ignores the fact that *the real*—of which the word *realism* is a derivative—is one of the deepest-rooted in our language and lies at the heart of how we think about the world. In many cases, it serves not simply as a neutral adjective—it determines the value of things. Just as non-philosophers agree that real friends are better than fake ones or that a genuine Rembrandt is much more valuable than a counterfeit, so philosophers would argue that real perfect beings are more perfect than imaginary ones. In short, the term *realism* seems too theoretically and practically entangled for us to do without it. How to deal with it, then? I propose we agree that the problem requires a thorough philosophical discussion. Of course, no book on the

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* Both the conference and the present issue were financed by a grant from the National Science Centre, Poland, for the project “The New Realism: A Forgotten Tradition in American Philosophy” (no. 2019/32/C/HS1/00307). I would like to thank all the speakers for an inspirational conference and Professor Piotr Gutowski and Doctor Marcin Iwanicki, the co-organizers. I am indebted to all contributors who agreed to offer their papers for this issue of *Annals of Philosophy*.

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topic, however long, could be comprehensive. Still, we can undertake the rather more modest task of focusing on selected aspects of the debates on realism in the hope of shedding new light on the general meaning of the real.

Such is the aim of this volume, the outcome of the international conference *Realism: Epistemological Foundations and Metaphysical Consequences* that took place in Kazimierz Dolny in October 2022. It comprises a series of metaphysical and epistemological discussions, most importantly on the boundary between the two. My principal rationale for the title both of the event and the present issue derives from the historical recognition of the significance of René Descartes and his definition of the so-called *philosophia prima*, the first philosophy, which determined the direction of passage between metaphysics and epistemology.

Since Aristotle, first philosophy has been understood as metaphysics—that is, (by definition) a general science—encompassing a discipline where “being as being” is studied. One such subordinate discipline was the theory of knowledge, also known as psychology. Aristotle believed that to account for the occurrence and the nature of mental processes—most notably knowledge, understood both as a process (of obtaining knowledge) and the result of the said process—one must refer to the most basic principles of metaphysics. For this reason, Aristotle’s *On the Soul* is simply the application of the investigations he conducted in *Metaphysics*.

By contrast, Descartes was perfectly aware that a philosopher who begins with metaphysics tacitly makes two assumptions: that they can know the world at all and that the knowledge thus obtained can be fully trusted. Since antiquity, it has been widely acknowledged that both assumptions are, at the very least, controversial. As Descartes argued, the first assumption must be preceded by a rejection of skeptical hypotheses such as the dream/evil demon/simulation hypothesis, which cannot be ruled out but can at best be ignored.¹ If any of these hypotheses were true, metaphysics would be doomed, alongside with a considerable number of beliefs we commonly find to be true. Of course, many philosophers believe these doubts to be not very serious, as we do not have a *positive* argument that any of these scenarios

¹ I have used a slash rather than a comma because I find these hypotheses to be an iteration of the same idea, namely, the view that what one calls the Universe was created differently than has been sketched by modern physics and that most of one’s views on its nature, history, and the existence/nature of beings that fill it are false. I am fully aware that many people think that God, who created the material world and has subsisted it ever since, may also be seen just as a creator of a simulation. I acknowledge that I see no way to discern between God and the “good demon” hypothesis.

take place. Even in the worst case, the menace of skepticism should convince us not to accept the view but to reject an unreasonably demanding definition of knowledge adopted by Descartes himself, namely as something absolutely certain, and replace it with a more modest one. In other words, there is no *a priori* and *a posteriori* argument against the view that, for example, the world appeared out of thin air thirty seconds ago, replete with people having fake memories of their past. However, given that such a scenario is very unlikely, it is unreasonable to be bothered with it, just as we are not bothered that—because of our ignorance and indifference—invisible or undetectable unicorns may starve to death.²

However, I think the second problem—the lack of trust in the knowledge we have obtained—is much more serious and must therefore be addressed. Following Democritus of Abdera, the ancient skeptics, and Galileo, Descartes made philosophers aware of the fact that human cognition is not free from distortions. Indeed, he suggests that human beings are not passive acquirers of knowledge, so these distortions are permanent and not merely accidental. Dreams and hallucinations make a strong case for the view that our minds can sometimes construct things that are not in the so-called *real* world. Ancient skeptics, on the other hand, turn their attention to much subtler cases of the mind's distortive activity in the process of obtaining beliefs, such as personal or social history. Descartes famously argued that unless we study influences we are ordinarily unaware of, we cannot know whether metaphysical theories based on commonsense knowledge of the world are a valuable outcome of meticulous investigation or a useless product of gross self-deception. Metaphorically speaking, this was the first fracture in the bridge between us as subjects of knowledge and the real world beyond our minds. As a result, metaphysics, which is interested in the nature of things on the other side of the bridge, must be preceded by our taking a closer look into the process by which knowledge is acquired; only then will we be prepared for (and able to avoid) possible traps. Epistemology should therefore precede metaphysics, so it is the former that deserves to be called the first philosophy.

In the post-Cartesian centuries, the gap between the subject of knowledge and so-called reality only widened. Philosophers, most notably Immanuel

² A critic may reply that my disbelief in the hypothesis of a recently created Universe is unjustified because it is based on an unverifiable assumption that it is more probable that the past was already there than that it was not. I agree. However, I believe that when two hypotheses are equally probable, it is a good idea to choose the more useful one. This pragmatic solution may be the only way to avoid many of the problems raised by skeptics.

Kant, argued that the nature of our cognitive powers makes it impossible for us to do metaphysics. More than a hundred years later, psychologists like Sigmund Freud pointed out that the psychological nature of man limits his abilities to know not only the real world but also his own mind. As a result, even introspection—the power of which Descartes had never doubted—became an object of criticism. In the philosophy of science, philosophers (backed up by scientists) concluded that physicists and chemists do not investigate the nature of reality but regularities in the way the (assumed) world affects our senses. The number of phenomena that are thought to be illusory is now arguably greater than ever: the self (METZINGER 2009), free will (SMILANSKY 2000), introspection (DENNETT 2003), and even phenomenal consciousness (FRANKISH 2016) are but four instances.³ Additionally, many academics, not only philosophers, argue that scientific discoveries, for instance those in biology, support the Kantian thesis that what we call the perception of reality is conditioned by a long process of natural selection and has nothing to do with reality *per se* (HOFMANN 2019). New technologies will breed even more problems; virtual reality may perhaps will lead us to the conviction that our commonsense definition of the real—formulated in terms of “the metaphysic of our original Indo-European ancestors as they stammered round their campfires,” as Bertrand Russell (1956, 137) once observed—must be altered. All in all, while the above list of examples is far from complete, it certainly suggests that the spirit of recent philosophy has been anti-realistic.

Such a conclusion compels us to ask many questions. Does this anti-realistic tendency mean that metaphysics is just a pile of nonsense? If not, how should one respond to the above conundrums, according to which many of the classical problems of metaphysics are just figments of our deluded beliefs? Should the commonsense definition of reality be changed to a more adequate, perhaps weaker one, as is the case with knowledge? These are just a few of the issues facing the contributors to the present volume. While not all the papers delivered during the conference are published herein, the selection provides an insight into what was discussed. The volume also mirrors the structure of the conference, in that it is divided into articles on the history of philosophy, epistemology, and metaphysics.

³ It is worth noting that Frankish’s illusionism is a form of skepticism that, to the best of my knowledge, has no precedent in the history of philosophy. Even ancient skeptics agreed that phenomenal judgments, such as “Now I experience redness” are undoubtedly true. Frankish, however, would disagree.

Leopold Stubenberg and Tadeusz Szubka present their historical papers introducing more technical debates. In “The Place of Naïve Realism in Russell’s Changing Accounts of Perception”, Stubenberg investigates Bertrand Russell’s theory of knowledge, which underwent many substantial changes during the second and third decades of the twentieth century. Szubka is interested in the late philosophy of Hilary Putnam. In “Putnam’s Natural Realism and Its Problems”, the author discusses the views expressed by the philosopher in his 1994 Dewey Lectures and developed thereafter. Both Russell and Putnam, arguably two of the most influential scholars of the previous century, were troubled by the problem of realism for most of their lives—which is clear evidence of the difficulties it raises.

The next section comprises two papers on epistemology. In “Radical Conventionalism and Hinge Epistemology”, Adam Grobler discusses Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz’s radical conventionalism, arguing that the Polish philosopher precedes Wittgenstein in providing the foundations for the theory known as hinge epistemology. Grobler argues that Ajdukiewicz was one of the most original thinkers of the twentieth century, fashioning many of the ideas later developed by English-speaking analytic philosophers. Meanwhile, Paweł Grabarczyk asks “What is Real in Virtual Reality?” For Grabarczyk, any opposition between the real and the virtual is superficial: “Virtual objects are real because they consist of physical states in computers.” Such a conclusion, counterintuitive though it may at first appear (but see, e.g., CHALMERS 2005), has important implications for many areas of human activity.

The last conference paper concerns metaphysics, although its author stresses the significance of the theory of knowledge. Saul Smilansky, in “The Reality of Free Will”, examines the possible implications of the idea that free will is but an illusion. While Smilansky’s position is well known, he takes it a step further, concluding that this illusion should lead us to accept a weaker, compatibilist conception of free will, one that would allow us to live the life as we led it before and prevent us from falling into despair. Such a solution accords with P. F. Strawson’s (1962) famous suggestion that some illusions cannot be simply dismissed; they can (and should) be adapted to our social practices. Both Strawson and Smilansky remind us that philosophical theories can have some undesirable consequences based on what Smilansky—following Friedrich Nietzsche—calls “the awfulness of truth”. The choice between accepting the truth and rejecting it by playing a game of make believe can indeed have serious repercussions.

This issue of the *Annals* also contains the paper of Maciej Smolak, titled “Aristotle on the Real Object of *Philia* and *Aretē*”. While the work was not presented at the conference and concerns ancient ethics, it fits neatly in this issue because it addresses the question: What are references for such concepts as *philia* and *aretē* and what is the relation between these references? The paper may be seen as just another proof that good philosophy cannot do without not only the analysis of human cognitive limitations but also a clear distinction of meaning of terms appearing in philosophical jargon.

I believe that each of these papers makes a valuable contribution to respective sub-disciplines. Taken together, they draw our attention to two important issues. First, they indicate that many of the debates around realism are far from being settled and that some topics have yet to be subject to philosophical reflection. It may be that realism is just another perennial problem for interminable discussions. Does this mean, then, that our efforts are ultimately futile? Not necessarily. One of the aims of philosophy in general is to comprehend its problems better and better. The papers collected in the present issue prove that we can, through meticulous investigation and careful analysis, get to the root of our commonsense beliefs and the way we think about the world, thereby gaining a greater understanding of the questions that stem from our natural curiosity. Second, although contemporary philosophy may be considered to be anti-Cartesian (at least in some respects), the problem of realism is just a side effect of following Descartes himself. He recognized that we are not passive observers who can do metaphysics *sub specie aeternitatis*; however, by acknowledging our limitations, we can get closer to the truth. While contemporary philosophers believe that our cognitive constitution is not the only dragon to slay (the second one is language), the primacy of the theory of knowledge is still the default position in analytically-oriented philosophy. In such a context, metaphysics is constructed on epistemological foundations. It appears, therefore, that epistemology plays the role of the first philosophy—whether we like it or not. It is as if we keep going back to Descartes and begin anew, but each time we see further and know more. In so doing, though, we may be able to avoid the aforementioned traps and, perhaps, draw closer to the truth that may be out there.

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