

# A Limited View of Realism

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## **Abstract**

In the paper we argue that no neat border line between ontology and epistemology can be drawn. This is due to the fact that the separation between factual and conceptual is rather fuzzy, and the world is characterized by a sort of ontological opacity which makes the construction of any absolute ontology difficult. Our ontology is characterized by the fact that the things of nature are seen by us in terms of a conceptual apparatus that is inevitably influenced by mind-involving elements, and all this has important consequences on both the question of scientific realism and the realism/anti-realism debate. Conceptualization gives us access to the world, while, on the other, it is the most important feature of our cultural evolution. While the idealistic thesis according to which the mind produces natural reality looks hardly tenable, it is reasonable to claim instead that we perceive this same reality by having recourse to the filter of a conceptual apparatus whose presence is, in turn, connected to the development of language and social organization.

Our science is essentially relational, and not absolute. The information with which it provides us is appropriate, but from our point of view. Science provides reliable information on the world, but this information is always relative to a particular framework, and it is a mistake to think that the limits of our cognitive capacities only have an aprioristic character. Science constantly attempts at providing answers to our questions about how things stand in the world, and thus purports to offer reliable information about it. But it should also be recognized that the extent to which science succeeds in accomplishing this task is disputable. What kind of realism, thus, can we actually endorse? Despite what many relativists claim, realism still is an arguable and defensible position. If one asks what difference is made to our knowledge claims if we accept the existence of an extra-conceptual world, the answer is the following: such recognition undermines the diffused anthropocentric stance which identifies reality with our limited knowledge of it.

**Keywords:** Realism, Anti-Realism, Ontology, Epistemology, Conceptual Apparatus, Nature.

To what extent are we entitled to draw a border line between ontology and epistemology? To many contemporary thinkers a positive answer to this question looks attractive, mainly because it reflects convictions deeply entrenched in our common sense view of the world. However - they argue - anyone wishing to clarify the distinction between the ontological and the epistemological dimensions, without having recourse to unwarranted dogmas, should recognize that such a positive answer poses more problems than it is meant to solve. This is due to the fact that the separation between factual and conceptual is not sharp and clean, but rather fuzzy.<sup>1</sup> To this recognition another remark should be added. As long as humans are concerned - so the argument goes - the world is characterized by a sort of “ontological opacity” which makes the construction of any absolute ontology very difficult. Our ontology is characterized by the fact that the things of nature are seen by us in terms of a conceptual apparatus that is inevitably influenced by mind-involving elements.<sup>2</sup> All this has important consequences on both the question of scientific realism and the realism/anti-realism debate.

Theoretically, we may admit that a distinction can be drawn between the natural world on the one hand, and the social-linguistic world on the other. However, according to many authors, it should not be difficult to understand that we began to identify ourselves and the objects that surround us only when the social-linguistic world *emerged from* the natural one, and this in turn means that our criteria of identification are essentially social and linguistic. Leaving aside any kind of Platonism, and recognizing - in a pragmatist vein - that the concept of “truth” is essentially tied to human interests, we need an intersubjective criterion giving rise to the notion of a world which is both objective and mind-independent. In other words, as John Dewey stated, the distinction subject/object is not to be found *in* nature: it arises when men have such an intersubjective criterion, i.e., within a social world which is created by men themselves.<sup>3</sup> But it is important to note at the onset that these remarks do not entail the total identification of the aforementioned two worlds. The conclusion is rather that, of the natural world as such, little can be said. We can admit that a border line between ontology and epistemology really exists but, as long as we are concerned, such a distinction looks less definable today than it was usually thought to be in the past.

There are two reasons which explain why things are so. On the one hand conceptualization gives us access to the world, while, on the other, it is the most important feature of our *cultural* evolution (which is distinct from - although not

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<sup>1</sup> It goes without saying that the reference work in this case still is Quine's classical paper “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”, in W.V.O. Quine (1980), pp. 20-46. For a more recent perspective see J. McDowell (1994).

<sup>2</sup> A view of this kind is endorsed in N. Rescher (1992).

<sup>3</sup> See especially J. Dewey (1994). Davidson exploits Dewey's insight in D. Davidson (1990).

totally alien to - biological evolution).<sup>4</sup> This does not mean to diminish the importance of the latter, which is specifically geared to the natural world and, after all, precedes our cultural development from the chronological viewpoint. However, it is cultural evolution that distinguishes us from all other living beings. While the idealistic thesis according to which the mind produces natural reality looks hardly tenable, it is reasonable to claim instead that we perceive this same reality by having recourse to the filter of a conceptual apparatus whose presence is, in turn, connected to the development of language and social organization.

All this, once again, prevents a clear distinction between ontology and epistemology. For example, it might be stated that ontology's task is to discover what kinds of entities make up the world ("what there is", in Quine's terms), while epistemology's job is to ascertain what are the principles by which we get to know reality. It is obvious, however, that if our conceptual apparatus is at work even when we try to pave our way towards an unconceptualized reality, our access to it entails anyhow the involvement of the mind. Resorting to a paradox, it might even be said that any unconceptualized reality turns out to be an *image* of the mind (even though, it is worth repeating it, this recognition does not force us to deny the mind-independent existence of unconceptualized reality).

At this point an important problem must be faced. Since the rejection of any scheme/content distinction looks hardly tenable,<sup>5</sup> the question arises whether it is more appropriate to speak of 'scheme' (singular) or of 'schemes' (plural). This is not a rhetorical question, as it might seem at first sight. What lies behind it is, rather, the question of ontological pluralism, which is in turn connected to the existence of possible alternative ways of conceptualizing the world.

The importance of such a question was clearly understood by William James. At the beginning of the past century, in fact, he wrote that:

It is possible to imagine alternative universes to the one we know, in which the most various grades and types of union should be embodied [...] we can imagine a world of things and of kinds in which the causal interactions with which we are so familiar should not exist.<sup>6</sup>

James went on saying:

The 'absolutely' true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day

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<sup>4</sup> The distinction biological/cultural evolution is constantly present in pragmatist authors like James, Peirce, and Dewey. For a contemporary assessment see N. Rescher (1990).

<sup>5</sup> See especially D. Davidson (1985), and R. Rorty (1982). We cannot take this problem into account here for reasons of space. For a recent criticism of Davidson's and Rorty's positions see S. Haack (1993).

<sup>6</sup> W. James (1907), pp.156-157.

converge [...] meanwhile we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood.<sup>7</sup>

The conclusion of this line of reasoning is that the great scientific and metaphysical theories of the past were adequate for centuries but, since human experience has boiled over those limits, we now call these theories only relatively true. Those limits were in fact casual, and “might have been transcended by past theorists just as they are by present thinkers”.<sup>8</sup>

James was not the first to note that our world-view can never be absolute, and that intelligent creatures whose experiential modes are substantially different from our own are bound to conceptualize reality in a rather diverse way. James, however, provided us with a clear picture which anticipates the contemporary debate on conceptual schemes. He claimed in this respect that:

In practical talk, a man’s common sense means his good judgement, his freedom from excentricity [...] In philosophy it means something entirely different, it means his use of certain intellectual forms or categories of thought. Were we lobsters, or bees, it might be that our organization would have led to our using quite different modes from these of apprehending our experiences. It *might* be too (we can not dogmatically deny this) that such categories, unimaginable by us to-day, would have proved on the whole as serviceable for handling our experiences mentally as those which we actually use.<sup>9</sup>

Someone might object that these are only mental experiments, whose importance cannot be overevaluated. However, mental experiments play a key role in both philosophy and science. No doubt they are merely hypothetical devices, but they also allow us to enter the dimension of *possibility*. By resorting to them, we are able to imagine how the world could have been in the past, could be today, or could turn out to be in the future. This is a specific characteristic of our relationship with the world, which is strictly connected to the cultural type of evolution mentioned above. Rationality is, thus, largely a matter of *idealization*. Although our natural origins and evolutionary heritage must be duly deemed important, we must give way as well to the recognition that there is indeed something that makes us unique. Only human beings are able to take idealities into account and to somehow detach themselves from the actual world. Rationality may also be seen as the expression of mankind’s capacity to see not only how things actually *are*, but also how they might have been and how they could turn out to be if we were to take some courses of action rather than others: the concept of possibility plays indeed a key role. It should eventually be noted that the dimension of possibility plays quite an important role even in the scientific domain, since scientific theories concern possible rather than actual reality. Newton’s theory

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 222-223.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

of universal gravitation takes into account the ideal mass in ideal space, and its status of scientific theory is granted by the fact that it holds for *any* mass.

In short, *possibilia* are a key component of our social-linguistic world, i.e., of the specifically human way of dealing with reality. Possible worlds and possible individuals are actual or potential products of our conceptual apparatus, and any strategy meant at eliminating them appears doomed for failure. The dimension of the possibility, besides being strictly tied to hypothetical reasoning, plays a fundamental role in our comprehension of both the natural and social-linguistic worlds. But it should also be clear that the dimension of possibility must anyhow make reference to some kind of agent, and the agent itself is thus an inevitable point of departure. We are compelled to adopt such a stance, because this is the only way opened to us for gaining access to the world. No one denies that it would be good to transcend our conceptual machinery in order to glimpse at how the world really is, independently of any view we can hold about it. This, however, cannot be done because of the very way we are made. Unlike some forms of classical idealism, we can recognize the presence of things that are real in the sense of being mind-independent but, on the other hand, a specification is needed to the effect that human beings have access to those things only via their conceptual apparatus.

Starting from such premises, it is reasonable to claim that (1) analytic and synthetic cannot be clearly separated, and (2) no neatly determinable distinction can be drawn between science and metaphysics. As Quine stated in the 1950s,

The totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs, from the most casual matters of geography and history to the profoundest laws of atomic physics or even of pure mathematics and logic, is a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges. Or, to change the figure, total science is like a field of force whose boundary conditions are experience [...] Revision even of the logical law of the excluded middle has been proposed as a means of simplifying quantum mechanics; and what difference is there in principle between such a shift and the shift whereby Kepler superseded Ptolemy, or Einstein Newton, or Darwin Aristotle?<sup>10</sup>

A follower of scientism might at this point be tempted to state the unconditioned superiority of the scientific world-view over the image of the world that Wilfrid Sellars used to define the 'manifest image', i.e. the commonsense image which is shared - in its large features - by all men qua men.<sup>11</sup> But is it really plausible to claim that science deserves the primary role in assessing any kind of conceptual scheme? What guarantees can science provide in this regard? And, above all, *which* science are we talking about in this context? No doubt the real world contains those entities which would be posited by an 'ideally complete' science such as the one envisioned by

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<sup>10</sup> W.V.O. Quine (1980), pp. 42-43.

<sup>11</sup> See W. Sellars (1963).

Charles S. Peirce. But this ideal completeness is not available, and we are therefore compelled to work with what we have at our disposal now. This takes us back to the *current* scientific world-view, that is to say, the one provided by today science. We must face, in sum, a notion of truth which is essentially 'relative' and bound to evolve with the passing of time.

In other words, the presence of a sort of Peircean ideal community of scientific researchers who are supposedly able to attain the 'real truth' about the world is not an option, but an indispensable condition for the truthfulness of our generalizations about reality. Peirce, in fact, made clear that the key characteristic of truth is stability, and that a true belief must at least be fated to be underwritten by the operation of scientific method.<sup>12</sup> Of course we cannot rule out the possibility that such an ideal community will exist in the future, but history of science should at least prompt us to be pessimistic in this regard. Ideal science, even when its realization is referred to the future, looks more a philosophical utopia than a feasible accomplishment (even though, as is well known, utopias are indeed useful when they are viewed as essentially 'regulative' ideas). The strong realistic thesis that science faithfully describes the real world turns out to be, thus, just a matter of intent.

The fact is that scientific world-views continuously evolve, which means that the scientific enterprise has an essentially *historical* character. As Werner Heisenberg pointed out, science always is the result of the encounter between the natural world on the one side, and human conceptions, practical interests and needs on the other.<sup>13</sup> The appeal to mental experiments is useful not only in daily life, but in the scientific domain too, because in this case science itself makes us understand that it permits us to know the world from a particular perspective, that is in turn geared to the specific relationships we entertain with the environment which surrounds us. John Dewey used the term *transaction* to denote this encounter, where the respective contributions of the observer and of the observed reality cannot be rigidly distinguished.<sup>14</sup>

This means that our science is essentially relational, and not absolute. The information with which it provides us is appropriate, but from *our* point of view. The Jamesian point that it is possible to imagine alternative universes to the one we know, and that intelligent creatures whose experiential modes are substantially different from our own are bound to interpret reality in a diverse way, must be taken seriously. In other words, we should recognize that the natural environment in which we live (and of which we are a substantial part) has an essential bearing on conceptualization, including the scientific one. Science provides reliable information on the world, but this information is always relative to a particular framework, and it is a mistake to think

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<sup>12</sup> For a good analysis of this point see N. Rescher (1978).

<sup>13</sup> W. Heisenberg (2000).

<sup>14</sup> J. Dewey (1994).

that the limits of our cognitive capacities only have an aprioristic character. We are mainly bound by *empirical* limits, due to the fact that we inquire into nature by means of an apparatus which answers certain stimuli, but not others. However, nothing in our actual science leads us to rule out the hypothesis that, in other natural environments, the development of science might have taken quite a different course.<sup>15</sup> In order to give plausibility to this hypothesis, we must only admit the existence of worlds whose natural environment is substantially diverse from our own, and certainly this is not mere science fiction.

By saying this, we leave the domain of mental experiments to enter that of hypotheses which are - at least in principle - empirically verifiable. No doubt our science today is the only science we know, but this should not lead us to exclude the possibility that there are other ways of investigating nature. After all, science tells us that there are many aspects of reality that we cannot get in touch with by means of our sensory apparatus (which is the product of a process of evolution which took place in *particular* environmental conditions). Therefore we should not uncritically accept Davidson's statement that "since there is at most one world, these pluralities are metaphorical or merely imagined".<sup>16</sup>

The question now is the following: are we authorized to claim that any absolutely objective ontology should then be left in the background, because little can be known about it? It should be noted that not only philosophers, but even many professional scientists have often denied the validity of the general picture of the world that the man of the street takes more or less for granted. In our century uncertainty about the content of our theories has grown fast, together with the feeling that there are *alternative* theories that can account equally well for all possible observations. Clearly the threat of relativism arises at this point, even though many authors nowadays no longer take relativism to be a threat, but just a matter of fact.

All this explains why the issue of conceptual schemes is important for both philosophers and scientists. For example, according to Niels Bohr's principle of complementarity we have, on the one side, a sort of Kantian world-in-itself which is both unknowable and undescrivable, and on the other side an 'us' which, unlike in Kant's picture, is not stable and determined. This means that, in our inquiries about the world, different questions can *all* receive coherent answers, with the disquieting effect that a comprehensive and coherent image of reality cannot be achieved. It is as if, conducting different experiments, we were to change conceptual scheme: the world experienced will in any case be diverse, and there is no way to combine the world of our experience with the various, differing conceptual schemes. The peculiar form of quantum effects entails that ordinary classical ideas about the nature of the physical world are profoundly

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<sup>15</sup> Interesting remarks on this topic can be found in N. Rescher (1984).

<sup>16</sup> D. Davidson (1985), p. 187.



incorrect, and some contemporary physicists endorse in this respect views which recall William James' characterization of consciousness as a "selecting agency".<sup>17</sup>

Obviously things were different when logical positivism still was the dominant doctrine in the philosophy of science. In that case the main purpose was to individuate the immutable models that lie beyond concrete scientific practice, because it was commonly held by the main representatives of neopositivism that science is objective and progressive in the cumulative sense of the term. It must be stressed, however, that the distance from the neopositivist model does not lead one automatically closer to some kind of methodological anarchism or postmodernism (in Rorty's sense of the term). Some authors, in fact, claim that science can effectively validate a plausible commitment to the actual existence of its theoretical entities. But scientific conceptions can get, at most, a rough consonance between our scientific ideas and reality.<sup>18</sup> And this statement should not sound surprising, if only one recalls what we said before about the difficulty to trace a precise border line between ontology and epistemology.

The general picture that emerges from the preceding remarks is the following. It is certainly correct to state that science means to offer correct information about the world, but the extent to which it succeeds in accomplishing this task is always questionable. We cannot claim that the picture provided by today science - our current scientific image of the world - is absolutely correct, because the history of science itself shows us that any such statement is likely to be rejected by future generations. While it may be recognized that science purports to offer a correct description of the real world, the past experience should also prompt us to accept its claims *sub condicione*, and to view them as merely provisional.

It has often been said in this regard that the actual unobservability of scientific entities rests on contingent facts, which depend on both the nature of the unobserved thing and the features of our perceptual mechanisms. This means that things which were in the past unobservable became observable later on, because we were able to artificially extend our perceptual capacities by means of such technologically advanced scientific instruments as microscopes and telescopes. By accepting these premises, any neat demarcation between observable and unobservable entities is not significant from an ontological point of view. It should be noted, however, that if we reject the realist perspective as long as scientific unobservable entities are concerned, even realism in general must be abandoned. Following this line of thought unobservable scientific entities are just contingently unobservable, so that their unobservability (due, for instance, to smallness of size) presents the same, resolvable difficulties that one has to deal with when far distant celestial bodies are taken into account (in the latter case, spatial location is the problem at issue).

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, H. Stapp (1993).

<sup>18</sup> Such a stance is defended in N. Rescher (1987).



The preceding arguments may be accepted with some reservations. Clearly, we must be ready to admit the reality of the so-called theoretical entities if we want to avoid any instrumentalistic conception of scientific knowledge. After all, it is easy to verify that for the operative scientists prediction and control are important just because they are supposed to monitor the adequacy of our scientific theories about reality. This is reason why antirealism has never been popular among scientists. As the physicist Steven Weinberg has it,

The insights of philosophers have occasionally benefited physicists, but generally in a negative fashion - by protecting them from the preoccupations of other philosophers [...] Physicists do of course carry around with them a working philosophy. For most of us, it is a rough-and-ready realism, a belief in the objective reality of the ingredients of our scientific theories.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, while it is correct to state the fallibility and continuous corrigibility of science, starting from these premises we are not allowed to draw the conclusion that no existential and descriptive claims about the real world should be made in scientific theorizing.

Science constantly attempts at providing answers to our questions about how things stand in the world, and thus purports to offer reliable information about it. But it should also be recognized that the extent to which science succeeds in accomplishing this task is disputable. No doubt relativity theory and quantum mechanics are the best scientific theories we have at our disposal now, but to assume that they will still be deemed adequate in the future is rather dangerous. Even theoretical entities of science are introduced for a utilitarian mission, i.e., to provide the materials of causal explanation for the real behavior of real things. This means that science is not a merely practical instrument for prediction and control that has no bearing on describing the nature of the world. Our science's claims regard the real world, but they always are tentative.

All we are entitled to say is that *if* today science (our present science) is correct, *then* the so-called theoretical entities exist and possess the characteristic features that it envisions. No science would indeed be possible without this basic realistic attitude, because its very aim is to provide an ontologically founded picture of reality. In understanding this fact, a philosopher of science has to recognize, on the one side, the descriptive and explanatory role that science purports to play, while, on the other, he must also stress that science is bound to be imperfect and fallible in its execution of such a role. It may also be noted, in this regard, that the supporters of instrumentalism usually endorse their position on grounds of a commitment to empiricism. But the type of empiricism they espouse is uncommon, because traditional empiricism is known as

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<sup>19</sup> S. Weinberg (1992), pp. 166-167.

the doctrine that any type of descriptive knowledge of the world must be grounded in experience. Since instrumentalists, instead, claim that experience cannot provide any descriptive knowledge of the real (extraphenomenal) world, their doctrine may be characterized as a full-fledged anti-empiricist stance.

At this point we are confronted by a crucial question: what kind of realism - if any - can we actually endorse? The question becomes even more important if we recall that, for the reasons stated above, many authors claim that no border between ontology and epistemology can be outlined. It is often stated that, in order to provide realism with a solid foundation, we need recourse to a reality that is totally independent of thought (and let alone of language).<sup>20</sup> We should, therefore, ask ourselves: *What* can we possibly think about this reality, and how can we say *what* it is like? Even when we imagine a world totally devoid of human presence, we must use human concepts. As we said previously, conceptualization is not an optional we can get rid of, but a built-in component of the nature of human beings.

Is it true, however, that the aforementioned claim heavily relies on the presence of an alleged capacity to get a view of the world which is totally independent from the experiencing subject? As is well known, such thesis has constantly been rejected by the pragmatist tradition. Writing about Russell's and Dewey's divergent opinions about logic, Tom Burke has made the following interesting remarks:

For both Dewey and Russell, a certain amount of conceptual stage setting has to go on prior to presenting a semantic theory [...] For Russell, we have to be able to make certain assumptions about the world independent of our experience of it. The world is in this view carved up into objects having properties and standing in relations, and we have only to open our eyes to note such facts [...] For Dewey, one jumps the gun by a long shot by making certain independent and sweeping claims about the world in this manner. In taking this stance, one is less than a step away from embracing a view referred to by Dewey as the 'spectator theory of knowledge', namely, the view that we can say something about the world (as it 'really' is) independent of our participation in it. Russell commits himself, qua logician, to such a view to the extent that he assumes a world full of facts without questioning how we come to grips with such facts in our experience, opting to focus solely on the abstract study of propositional or linguistic systems.<sup>21</sup>

In the philosophy of science, this means that we can never assume that a particular scientific theory gives us *the* true picture of reality, since we know perfectly well from the history of science that, in a future we cannot actually foresee, it will be replaced by a better theory. And it should be noted, moreover, that this future theory will be better for future scientists, but not the best in absolute terms, since its final destiny

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<sup>20</sup> In other words, we should adopt what Putnam calls the "God's Eye Point of View"; see H. Putnam (1981).

<sup>21</sup> T. Burke (1994), pp. 56-57.

is to be displaced by yet another theory. The current state of scientific knowledge is one among other cognitive states that share the same imperfection. There is indeed a strong prospect that many or most of our current scientific theories will be recognized to be inadequate: our current scientific knowledge is nothing but a set of hypotheses, many or most of which will be regarded as untenable. Not only are we not in a position to claim that our knowledge of reality is complete; we are not even in a position to claim that our knowledge of reality is correct. We need a more modest view in this case. Just as we think now that our predecessors held an inadequate vision of the world, so it is reasonable to assume that our successors will hold the same opinion about our vision of the world.

Science, in sum, is not a stable system, but a dynamic process, and this fact leads to view as problematic all those conceptions that place on the shoulders of future science the burden of perfection. Science is not rational because it has a solid foundation, but because it is a continuously evolving self-correcting enterprise, whose claims are *always* open to the possibility of revision. It is a continuous quest for optimal solutions whose final destiny, however, is to be overcome. For this reason it is better to endorse a modest realism. The strong version of scientific realism ignores a basic fact: we can never trust completely and in detail what our actual scientific theories claim, since history shows that, sooner or later, they will be replaced. This is the reason why history of science plays a key role, and in this regard we think that something more can be said. Even the history of the *philosophy* of science is important, since it makes us understand how the models by which philosophers interpret science (and reflect on it) change.<sup>22</sup> We should be skeptical about any proposal which aims at distinguishing in a rigid manner science from metaphysics. There is no atemporal 'scientific image of the world', but many images located in the flux of time. The very image of common sense which - apparently at least - is quite stable, continuously evolves and incorporates elements coming from the various scientific images.

If we claim that the science of our day provides the true picture of how the world really is, we seriously risk (given the concrete situation in which we happen to live) to hypostatize something that simply is a contingent and historically determined product of our action. This product is valid in a particular period of our cultural evolution, and an approach such as the one previously envisioned should prevent us from claiming that the ontology of today science is the absolute ontology that so many metaphysicians were looking for in the past. The preceding remarks prompt us to conclude that relativism and fallibilism are not ghosts to be afraid of, but just inevitable factors of our relationship with the surrounding environment. Richard Rorty was - at least in

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<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, D. Oldroyd (1986).

this case - right when he noted that natural science is not a natural kind,<sup>23</sup> since it is essentially geared to historical and cognitive values.

However, it is essential to note that the aforementioned remarks do not necessarily lead towards some form of antirealism. It is correct to state that, due to our cognitive position in the world and its limitations, the perspective provided by the conceptual framework we employ cannot be transcended. This amounts to saying that, although the world does not need our participation in order to be, our epistemic access to the world is given by such participation. Any description, thus, is bound to be determined by our operational perspectives. We are better not to say *much* about an absolute reality, even though we may push our imagination so far as to imagine how it could be. Our ontology is always bound to have epistemological commitments or, to put it in different terms, ontological commitments cannot be denied an epistemological side.

Our science is bound to be imperfect because we, humans beings who construct it, are imperfect creatures. In order to obtain final and metaphysically strong answers we should detach ourselves from contingency, but we will never be able to do this. We get to know the natural environment by using scientific instruments and formulating scientific theories, but the history of the natural world with which we are acquainted always is a history that refers to human beings, because we develop it by having recourse to our conceptual apparatus. We can imagine a world in which no conceptual scheme is at work because we are able to run the paths of possibility.

On the other hand, however, nothing prevents us from claiming that absolute reality - i.e., a reality which does *not* depend on our cognitive capabilities - is *there*. After all science is not important because it provides us with the correct (i.e., unique) paradigm of knowledge. It is important, rather, because it makes us understand that the world is - or might be - different from how we see it. And this, once again, casts doubts about a strange feature of Davidson's philosophy: he does not take into account the possibility that reality might be different from what we take it to be. We can admit that common sense is a sort of background comprehensive theory which grounds everything else including science: it is just our standard way of viewing the world and of dealing with it. However, we should also recognize that it possesses a *practical* primacy, and not an ontological one.

Even admitting that our ontology depends on communication, and that only communication allows us to hold the concept of objective truth,<sup>24</sup> we are not allowed to claim - as Davidson does - that our view of the world is, in its plainest features, largely correct. Starting from these premises, we should instead say that the knowledge of *our* world (the common sense or manifest image, to use once again Sellars' terms),

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<sup>23</sup> R. Rorty (1991).

<sup>24</sup> See D. Davidson (2001).

and not the knowledge of *the* world as such, is largely correct. Sellars pointed out, in fact, that “since this image [the manifest or common sense image of the world] has a being which transcends the individual thinker, there is truth and error with respect to it, even though the image itself might have to be rejected, in the last analysis, as false”.<sup>25</sup>

As a matter of fact science introduces us to whole dimensions of reality which were previously *unknown* to human beings. This explains that (1) reality-as-such and reality-as-known-by-us do not always coincide, and that (2) a distinction between ontology and epistemology can - and indeed must - be made. Given our cognitive limits such a distinction is for sure hard to be drawn but, still, its philosophical importance is so evident that any attempt to overcome it leads to the unjustified thesis that no reality lies beyond our cognitive capabilities.

We would like to stress that an author like Quine seems - sometimes, at least - aware of this fact. In an essay entitled “Existence” he makes the following claims:

Which ontology to ascribe to a man depends on what he does or intends with his variables and quantifiers. This second appeal to language is no more to be wondered at than the first; for what is in question in both cases is not just what there really is, but what someone says or implies that there is. Nowhere in all this should there be any suggestion that what there is depends on language [...] It may in this sense be said that ontological questions are parochial to our culture. This is not to say that a thing may exist for one culture and be non-existent for another. Existence is absolute, and those who talk of existence can say so. What is parochial is the talking of it.<sup>26</sup>

What prevents Quine from fully drawing the proper consequences of these remarks is his thesis that ontology is relative to language. Quine is often led to blur any distinction between ontology and epistemology because he tends to use interchangeably two different meanings of the term “ontology”: (i) what there is and (ii) what we “believe” there is.

In the last analysis we would like to stress that, despite what many relativists claim, realism still is an arguable and defensible position. Realism is for sure quite an unpopular stance today but, for the reasons stated above, we find the standard arguments against it by no means conclusive. And, if one asks what difference is made to our knowledge claims if we accept the existence of an extra-conceptual world, our answer is the following: such recognition is likely to undermine the largely diffused anthropocentric stance which identifies reality with our (limited) knowledge of it.

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<sup>25</sup> W. Sellars (1963), p. 14.

<sup>26</sup> W.V.O. Quine (1970), pp. 93-94.

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