External Realism as a Non-Epistemic Thesis[1]

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Abstract: In this paper I concentrate on evaluating Searle's concept of external realism as a non-epistemic thesis. Above all, I evaluate the role it plays in our system of beliefs, knowledge and communicative obligations. There are two important questions: (1) whether a return of transcendental philosophy creates a positive alternative to philosophical naturalism (Quine); (2) whether for the same purpose Fraassens' constructive empiricism suffices.

Keywords: condition of intelligibility, constructive empiricism, external realism, point-of-view invariance, naturalism.

> *So, where does point-of-view invariance come from? It comes simply from the apparent existence of an objective reality – independent of its detailed structure. Indeed, the success of point-of-view invariance can be said to provide evidence for the existence of an objective reality. Our dreams are not point-of-view invariant. If the Universe were all in our heads, our models would not be point-of-view invariant.* (Stenger 2006, 187)

In recent decades we have witnessed the return of metaphysics to the analytical tradition. John Searle is also sensitively emancipating and elaborating several metaphysical concepts without, however, falling into the familiar pitfalls of traditional metaphysical controversies. In this paper I concentrate on evaluating Searle's concept of external realism. Above all, I evaluate the role it plays in our system of beliefs,

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knowledge and communicative obligations. I also detract from some of Searle's conclusions presented at the end of the eighth chapter of his study 'The Construction of Social Reality' (1997). Whether a return of transcendental philosophy creates a positive alternative to philosophical naturalism (Quine), that is in terms of any fruitful cooperation between philosophers and scientists, is an important question.

Searle defines external realism (ER) as an ontological theory as follows:

> Realism is the view that there is a way that **things** are that is **logically independent** of all human representations. Realism does **not say how** things are but **only that** there is a way that they are. (Searle 1997, 155)[2]

He notes that ER is neither a theory of truth nor the theory of language and not even a theory of knowledge. This clearly and persistently states the ER status as a non-epistemic thesis, and thus rejects the traditional critique of realism in the epistemological tradition of modern philosophy. A certain ambiguity lies in the reasons to link the epistemic approach with antirealism. I believe that this approach could be free of creating ontological theories, this approach does not prefer antirealism to realism, committing both to the pyre because they contribute nothing to our knowledge.

In the previous definition it is important to note the highlighted terms. First, Searle talks about *things*, but notes that it would be preferable to use the neutral designation *it* (as in the sentence "It is raining" does not denote *it* as a reference). Similarly, our ER does not say *how* things are, but *that* they are in a certain (incomprehensible?) way.[3]

This is an important finding, because although Searle repeatedly and firmly states that he does not care about the nature of reality, but about its mere existence, in some situations it is evident that these lim-

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[2] Given the focus only on the 7th and 8th chapters of Searle (1997) in the following text I will include bibliographic information only in direct quotations of this work.

[3] In accordance with the noted return of transcendental philosophy it is worth recalling that even the early Wittgenstein can be read through a transcendental lens. Science tells us *how* the world is, but *that* it is remains mystical. "Nicht *wie* die Welt ist ist das Mystische, sondern *dass* sie ist" (Wittgenstein 1969, 148). But this is also an undeniable horizon of our questioning "How?"

its of ER are too restrictive for him. Searle's discussion of the 'Ding an Sich Argument' shows us that, even if the ER provides only a vague *it* (an inconceivable something), it does not follow that knowledge does not concern reality.

> The thesis that there is reality independent of our representations identifies not how things are in fact, but rather identifies a space of possibilities. (Searle 1997, 182)

Second, things are according to the ER logically (not causally) independent of human representations, which brings us to the understanding that the ER cannot be constructed as an empirical thesis, rather:

> ER is thus not a thesis nor an hypothesis but the **condition of having certain sort of theses** or hypotheses. (Searle 1997, 178)

This demonstrates Searle's major conclusion: ER is the condition of the intelligibility of our beliefs.

Whereas philosophers such as Nelson Goodman and Hilary Putnam derive from Searle's recognized conceptual relativity refutation of ER, Searle constructs his thesis that reality may be subjected (adequately) to various alternative (and arbitrary) descriptions. Similarly, Ronald Giere also expresses this in his Perspective Realism (see Giere 2006) with the difference that he does not hold a transcendental position, but notes that the world can be objectively/independently described as it is, which demonstrates the sequence of increasingly sophisticated scientific theories. The transcendental position can be contrarily seen in the expression of the physicist Victor Stenger, who derives his realism from the point-of-view invariance of physical models.[4]

The most valuable aspect of Searle's conception is viewing ER as the basic condition of the intelligibility of our beliefs and differentiates this condition from (mere) truth-condition. At this point it becomes evident that the only argument for ER may be a transcendental one:

> (…) the only argument we could give for ER would be a "transcendental" argument in one of Kant's many senses of that term: We assume that a certain condition holds, and then try to show the presupposition of that condition. (Searle 1997, 183)

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[4]   "The models of physics cannot depend on any particular point of view" (Stenger 2006, 57).

ER is thus the background presupposition on normal understanding, unlike the others BP, is it fundamentally pervasive and substantial.

Searle uses ER to reject phenomenalist idealism:

> What we should say is this: A public language presupposes a public world in the sense that many (not all) utterances of a public language purport to make references to phenomena that are ontologically objective, and they ascribe such and such feature to these phenomena. (Searle 1997, 186)

This is the most important finding of Searle's position and it introduces the definition of a transcendental dimension of the contemporary analytic tradition. The *World*, of which Searle speaks, so as to grasp the most appropriate equivalent of the *Kantian regulatory idea* of the world, also acts as *Davidson's world*, which is an indispensable element of the triangulation. The world that Davidson and Searle posit is the transcendental condition of the intelligibility of our beliefs. ER is not a condition of knowledge, but an intelligible condition. This conclusion should resonate for a long time because it is the position from which it is possible to criticize not only antirealists of any genre, but also an escalation alternative of the naturalistic tradition of analytical philosophy, which does not admit any non-empirical thesis.

Evaluating Searle's conclusions, we note that Searle does not prove the truth of ER, but only its transcendental sense, and consequently he concedes that he did not refute solipsism. I think it shows us the possibility of an alternative approach. One can renounce discussions of realism, antirealism and solipsism and be content with a pragmatic empirical approach, where the Constructive Empiricism of Fraassens' type seems to be the most adequate.[5] Sober empiricists will not enter into claims about the nature of reality, and will not degrade it to the sum of our representations, leaving only the statement that our representations are constitutive for our descriptions of the world. The regulatory idea of the world provides no clue to our knowledge of the world.

Searle concedes that normal understanding is revisable, but denies that this refutes ER. However, he also states that throughout the history of science there are seemingly ontologically objective phenomena

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[5] Owing to Searle's point that normal understanding is not the only understanding that is available, and refers to the problems of quantum physics; see Fraassen (1998).

actually replaced by the objective. The question then arises, where do we derive the justification of their objectivity if the regulatory idea of a world cannot provide such a guarantee? We then revert to the basic problem, because we cannot guarantee replacement of normal understanding only after a strict limit, for this does not imbue the regulatory idea with sufficient potency. Finally we arrive at nothing and can stick to constructive empiricism (not at antirealism).

Despite the convincing accuracy of Searle's conception of ER, we can ask whether transcendentalism is a fruitful variant of analytic tradition. Does it represent a more attractive alternative analytical tradition than a naturalized epistemology? Does it provide us a new understanding beyond the previous tradition?

I am convinced that if, for example, we reproach Quine that his naturalized epistemology could be interpreted idealistically, he would be appalled at what path the analytic tradition has taken. His philosophy has no place for concepts such as realism and idealism.

The corollary of Fraassen's and Searle's view is ultimately the same. Both are convinced of the objectivity of our (scientific) knowledge. But what prevents us interpreting the world in different ways? Is it the regulatory idea of the world?

Let us conduct a thought experiment: Luke is a scientist exploring deep space. Philosophically schooled he knows that the ER is a condition of intelligibility. On his travels he meets several entities that he is able to classify in a developed network of scientific models. Nowhere does he find a hint of other conflicting scientific network models, after examining the entire universe (universe's network) provides a complete theory of reality. One of the entities that Luke classified was SAMAN who has a totally other representations.[6] Basically the only thing which SAMAN matches (unreflectedly) with Luke is the ER. Like Luke SAMAN also classifies everything into totally different scientific network models, without reflecting on alternative networks. Luke and SAMAN cross the frontier into a land of a new kind of "solipsism". Can we argue that in some sense they still share the same world?

The basic motivation for Searle's defense of realism appears to be the need to confront the consequences of antirealistic position that

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[6]   Alternatively, they may have different pure a priori forms, see Kant (1956, 92-93).

erodes the foundations of rationality, and ingresses the irrationality of such thought "systems" as post-structuralism.

I think that we need to combat irrationalism and its attendant anti-realism. However, given that we have no obligation to instill the belief in realism into anyone,[7] it is questionable whether for the same purpose Fraassens' approach suffices.

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[7] "Pretheoretically we take external realism for granted, and for that reason it need not be a belief, but is prior to having beliefs" *(*Searle 1997, 195).