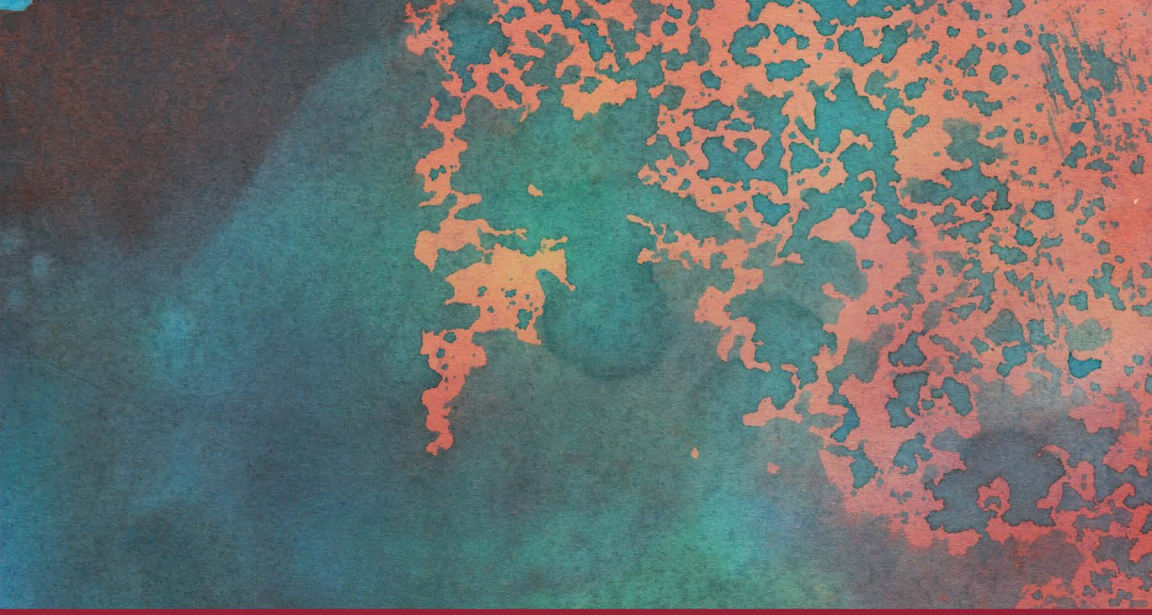

Routledge Frontiers in the Development of International Business, Management and Marketing

PHILOSOPHY OF MARKETING

THE NEW REALIST APPROACH

Matteo Giannasi and Francesco Casarin

Philosophy of Marketing

How can we overcome the rapidly ageing postmodernist paradigm, which has become sterile orthodoxy in marketing? This book answers this crucial question using fresh philosophical tools developed by New Realism. It indicates the opportunities missed by marketing due to the pervasiveness of postmodernist attitudes and proposes a new and fruitful approach pivoting on the significance of reality to marketing analyses and models.

Intensifying reference to reality will boost marketing research and practice, rather than impair them; conversely, neglecting such a reference will prevent marketing from realising its full potential, in several contexts. The aim of the book is foundational: its purpose is not a return to traditional realism but to break new ground and overcome theoretical obstacles in marketing and management by revising some of their assumptions and enriching their categories, thereby paving the way to fresh approaches and methodological innovations. In that sense, the book encourages theoretical innovation and experimentation and introduces new concepts, like invitation and attrition, which can find fruitful applications in marketing theory and practice. That is meant to be conductive to the solution of important difficulties and to the uncovering of new phenomena. The last chapter of the book applies the new approach to eight case studies from business contexts.

This book will be of interest to philosophers interested in New Realism and to researchers, scholars, and marketing professionals sensitive to the importance and fruitfulness of reference to reality, for their own purposes.

Matteo Giannasi is Adjunct Professor of Philosophy, Critical Thinking, Cultural Heritage and Tourism Supply, and Cultural Policies at Ca' Foscari University Venice, Italy. He is also education and audience development consultant for cultural institutions.

Francesco Casarin is Full Professor of Marketing and director of the Management of Arts and Culture Lab, Department of Management, Ca' Foscari University Venice, Italy.

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to our wives Marian and Crista

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Preface

Is the notion of reality of any use to marketing, or does it rather stand in the way of mature and self-aware marketing research and practice?

This book is about the relevance of reality to marketing. It is about the meaningfulness and significance of reference to reality for marketing models, strategic marketing analyses, and effective marketing policies.

In a nutshell, the main thesis of this book is that reality matters to marketing. Its consequences and corollaries are:

- that reference to reality ought to play a central role in marketing theory and practice;
- that marketing researchers and practitioners would greatly benefit by devoting a larger share of their attention to the role played by reference to reality in all human thought and behaviour;
- that reality and the (informal or institutionalised) quest for it ought to be the beacon—and not a blind spot—of present and future marketing theory and practice.

The second, subsidiary, thesis of the book is that intensifying reference to reality would boost marketing research and practice rather than impair them; and, conversely, neglecting such a reference has prevented marketing from realising its full potential in several contexts.

A greater appreciation of the value of reference to reality for marketing will emerge not as an inconvenient, if inescapable, theoretical requirement but rather as a fecund and viable intellectual opportunity that marketing scholars and practitioners should feel eager to embrace and explore alongside philosophers, psychologists, and social scientists. In order to uphold these views, the book will vindicate 'realism', the thesis that there is a reality, a way things are independently of any particular perspective, and it will criticise various versions of 'antirealism', the thesis that there is no reality (or, in different versions, that reference to it is impossible, that it does not make any sense, or that it is irrelevant).

Aims of the Book

This book is an exploration of the still partly unexpressed (and largely underestimated) theoretical potential of reference to reality for the description, modelling, and analysis of human thought and behaviour, with a special focus on phenomena of primary interest for management research and practice. It is not, primarily, an extrinsic philosophical survey of marketing models from an epistemological perspective.[1]

The aim of the book is to break new ground and overcome theoretical obstacles in marketing theory and practice by revising some of their assumptions and enriching their categories, thereby paving the way to fresh approaches and methodological innovations. This is intended to be conducive to the solution of important difficulties and to the uncovering of new phenomena. In that sense, this book seeks to encourage theoretical innovation and experimentation in marketing theory and practice, not to promote an unlikely *retour à l'ordre*, through the restoration of some orthodoxy.

Indeed, in writing the book, its authors did not intend to issue a philosophical wake-up call about, say, a supposed epistemological relaxation in marketing theory and practice, which may have compromised the theoretical rigour or scholarly credibility of its output; the aim of the book is not, for instance, to remind the reader of the meta-theoretical principle that every theory which disregards reference to reality as irrelevant is in one way or another self-refuting. We shall, on occasion, touch upon such issues, but we are not primarily concerned with prescriptive epistemology or with Manichaean taxonomies of marketing theories and styles.

What we are concerned with is pointing out genuine and partially unexplored theoretical possibilities and of course arguing for them and defending them against traditional or possible objections. We are also interested in distinguishing such theoretical possibilities from earlier versions of similar ideas, which for some time have been considered (sometimes correctly, sometimes too hastily) as philosophically outdated or discredited.

Philosophical Paradigms and Marketing Research

This book may appear to some scholars in the humanities and social sciences as something like a retraction of a well-known philosophical thesis, a thesis which was for a period so commonly accepted as to be considered as something like a contemporary philosophical received view: that reference to reality plays no crucial role in such phenomena as meaning, thought, language, semiosis, iconicity, theory, understanding, knowledge, belief, desire, volition, and the like. In fact, the book is also an attempt to show that such a radical claim has been recently challenged with fresh arguments and most importantly that it can lead both philosophy and the social sciences into sterile theoretical paths.

In fact, the book may even appear to some as a philosophical *mea culpa*: it denounces the responsibilities of prominent twentieth-century philosophical movements, which, with their most radical slogans, contributed to leading astray some part of contemporary marketing research. They also distracted marketing from the appreciation of the relevance of referring to reality for human thought and behaviour and suggested that reference to reality is epistemologically obsolete, redundant, or untenable, that there is no place for it in contemporary culture and society at large.

In that sense, our appeal to reality is animated by the desire to challenge what sometimes seems to be considered common knowledge in contemporary marketing and other social sciences: the idea that the notion of reality is a theoretical dross or scoria and not a genuine resource and beacon.

Reference to Reality as a Theoretical Opportunity

Our primary goal is to point out that banishing a robust reference to reality from marketing scholarship and other social sciences may have become a kind of theoretically sterile orthodoxy. Calling for a return of reality—or to it—is an encouragement to open new theoretical windows and sail new seas, not to return to some safe harbour.

We do not wish to bring contemporary research back from the alleged exclusive concern of marketing with appearances to the purported passion of genuine philosophy for being. We do not even attempt to bring marketing back from open and pluralistic approaches to some supposed classical epistemological ideal. We rather strive to expose both contemporary marketing and contemporary philosophy to the revitalising asperities of reality. Indeed, rather than accepting the received oversimplification of marketing theory and practice as exclusively concerned with appearances and persuasion (Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995), and not with reality, this book promises to draw the attention of marketing scholars and practitioners to the importance and fruitfulness of reference to reality—for their own ends.

Note

1. Epistemological debates are common to all sorts of research fields, including, of course, marketing. Cf. for instance, Hunt (1983, 1993, 2003); Reidenbach and Robin (1991); Brown (2001).

Introduction

1 Setting the Stage

Twentieth-century philosophy was certainly much more than a long series of attempted refutations of realism. However, despite its protagonists having many different and often mutually incompatible agendas, it was largely dominated by antirealism. The most prominent exponents of phenomenology, existentialism, philosophical hermeneutics, analytic philosophy, neo-pragmatism, and post-structuralism proposed or endorsed some version of the thesis that realism is false or meaningless at best (Husserl 1913, 1931; Heidegger 1927; Carnap 1928, 1950; Sartre 1943; Merleau-Ponty 1945; Wittgenstein 1953; Gadamer 1960; Dummett 1959, 1982, 1991; Derrida 1967b; Goodman 1978; Rorty 1979, 1989; Putnam 1981a, 1990; Davidson 1983; Vattimo 1983).

Philosophical realism never became extinct. However, it was considered (and tended to consider itself) a marginalised position, especially in the second half of the twentieth century (Devitt [1984] 1991; De Caro 2015). The rejection of realism was so widespread, even across hard-felt philosophical divides, that it was sometimes used as a bridge by philosophers attempting to resume a fruitful dialogue between different philosophical schools (Rorty 1979, 1991a, 1991b). Antirealism reached its cultural pinnacle with the postmodernist movement (Lyotard 1979; Baudrillard 1981; Vattimo and Rovatti 1983; Rorty 1979, 1989). Postmodernism boosted the credit and influence of antirealism to further academic, political, and social debates, from literary criticism to critical theory, feminism, postcolonial studies, gender studies, art studies, theology, anthropology, historiography, and beyond. Under the influence of Postmodernism, late twentieth-century culture interpreted antirealism as fruitful and liberating (Rorty 1979, 1989; Vattimo 1983, 1989).

Dissatisfaction with classical modernist strategies and assumptions in the 1980s and 1990s did not leave marketing untouched: leading researchers abandoned traditional approaches, which they sometimes deemed as "positivistic" (Holbrook and O'Shaughnessy 1988; Hunt 1991) and launched alternative or complementary programmes, pivoting upon

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different concepts. Experiential Marketing (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Schmitt 2000; Gilmore and Pine 2007; Carù and Cova 2007a), Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 2007), Relationship Marketing (Gummesson 1999), and Service Dominant Logic (Vargo and Lusch 2004, 2008) are the most influential of these non-modernist programmes, and they all share a discontent with "modernist" assumptions and methods. Those four programmes contributed to the renovation of marketing research and practice over recent decades and became dominant. As we shall see, their emergence during the postmodernist era has left clear birthmarks on all of them, in terms of assumptions, concepts, and intellectual bias. We shall discuss them here.

If realist philosophers never abandoned the philosophical battlefield, even in the heydays of post-structuralism and neo-pragmatism, the twenty-first century has witnessed a clear resurgence of openly realist positions and research programmes (Searle 1995, 2010; Ferraris 2001, 2012; Harman 2002; Meillassoux 2006; DeLanda 2006; Brassier 2007; Garcia 2010; Bryant 2011, Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011a; Bogost 2012; Benoist 2011, 2017, 2018; Gabriel 2014b, 2015). The "Return of Reality" (De Caro and Ferraris 2012) and "New Realism" (Ferraris 2012, Gabriel 2014a, Benoist 2018) have marked a significant shift in recent philosophy and have partly reshaped the philosophical landscape of the past decade. No less importantly, they have questioned the long-lived dominance of postmodernist antirealism in other academic fields as well as in politics, ecology, literature, and the arts. Antirealism is still a largely prevailing attitude. However, the shift can be detected, and allegiances have begun to change.

The new and powerful wave of philosophical realism has different causes. It certainly depends upon the gradual depletion of the postmodernist movement itself, of its potential for innovation. It is also related to a genuine philosophical dissatisfaction with arguments against realism or with certain of their consequences (Searle 1995; Nagel 1997; Ferraris 2001; Benoist 2005; Meillassoux 2006; Boghossian 2006). The return of reality is also related to significant changes in sensibility and awareness, linked to political and ecological factors. Most significantly, the postmodernist expectation that an era of post-truth and post-reality would contribute to a cultural emancipation from authoritarian ideologies and consolidate the perspectives of liberal democracy had to come to terms with the resurgence of historical negationism, the proliferation of conspiracy theories, the disintegration of public opinion, and the unprecedented manipulation of democratic processes through micro-targeted fake news (Latour 2004; Ferraris 2012). Finally, realism has gained traction also thanks to the growing global awareness of—and concern about—unprecedented ecological and environmental challenges, threatening future generations and, indeed, life itself on the planet. Contemporary ecological consciousness appears more and more dissatisfied with the postmodernist

antirealist philosophical horizon, with its insistence upon the conceptual, linguistic, and institutional relativity of socially and individually attested phenomena (Latour 2004, 2012; Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011b), and it has grown averse to the use of antirealist arguments against the reality of climate change.

Far from revealing itself as an uncompromising ally of liberal democracy, antirealism has turned out to be surprisingly susceptible also to a cynical, demagogic, and negationist political agenda. Can—and should—contemporary marketing be unaffected by all these changes? Our answer is that these changes are too significant to be ignored, and that marketing ought to embrace them, instead of trying to resist them.

2 Conflicting Paradigms and Philosophical Prophecies

As should have begun to emerge from the opening remarks, this book aims to be constructive but nonconformist, arguing against some widespread views, both in and about marketing theory. It challenges certain common assumptions regarding marketing methods and models and their relation to influential trends in contemporary philosophy. In doing so, this book attempts to also tell a somewhat different tale from the one many may be used to, about contemporary philosophy, its purportedly unquestionable tenets, and its most promising trends.

We argue in favour of a cluster of philosophical programmes and approaches revolving around a core attitude called 'New Realism', to distinguish it from previous versions or formulations of similar ideas. Neither antirealism nor realism are schools or orthodoxies of any sort: proposals belonging to either side may diverge from each other with respect to specific issues or topics. Nevertheless, those expressions capture significant patterns in recent philosophical debates and cut them up in fruitful ways.

Philosophers sometimes enjoy producing assessments of what contemporary philosophical scholarship, or its allegedly most sophisticated representatives, have ruled out once and for all as untenable or have incontrovertibly proved or recognised as indisputable. Such assessments typically have the unpleasant side effects of oversimplifying debates, of underestimating theoretical alternatives, and perhaps of censoring nonconventional approaches by polarising perspectives between imaginary avant-garde and more traditional positions. Such assessments[1] rarely stand the test of time, but they are sometimes taken at face value by scholars from other fields, who mistake them for unbiased reports about accepted theoretical paradigms and do not realise that they are at best thought-provoking manifestos. Such uncritical acceptance typically occurs when the relevant philosophical position enjoys intellectual acclaim, but sometimes it lingers on long after it has lost its early supporters.

We feel that something like that has happened to the well-known claim that contemporary philosophy has once and for all emancipated itself from the idea that reference to reality ought to play a theoretically crucial role: an idea deemed by some of its critics (and they were legion) as archaic, obsolete, theoretically unsophisticated, epistemologically redundant, or even ideologically compromised. We believe that scholars in the social sciences, and more specifically in marketing studies, have not been immune to such a tendency and have overestimated the theoretical strength and intellectual credit of the claim that reference to reality plays no significant role. Indeed, they may even have mistaken a provoking intellectual *vogue* for something like an enduring philosophical standard. We, therefore, believe it is time to draw the attention of marketing researchers and practitioners to alternative and viable philosophical voices.

3 The Turning of the Tide

We are prepared to admit that at least part of the reason why reference to reality was not at the forefront of debates in philosophy and the social sciences in the second half of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century is that a large share of the best intellectual energies of that time was spent investigating the perspectives of the opposite thesis: the thesis that reality has no significant role to play in a philosophical account of meaning, thought, knowledge, and action and that consciousness, experience, language, or interpretation have much more to say about them. However, the philosophical tide is now starting to turn again. Part of this book is about the new, strong, and promising tendencies in town. *Nota bene*: not the only legitimate ones, but surely solid, credible, and fruitful ones.

Without falling prey to a temptation to make a final assessment, we believe it is appropriate to draw our readers' attention to the gradual loss of philosophical credit of the claim that reference to reality has no crucial role to play in philosophical or theoretically sophisticated accounts. In fact, that claim never vanquished its opponents from the philosophical battlefield: some authors (Searle 1983, 1995; Millikan 1984; Devitt [1984] 1991) have always argued against it. For at least the last twenty years that claim has even lost many of its original supporters (Ferraris 2012), and philosophers who occupy alternative positions have been developing sophisticated theoretical arguments, categories, and research programmes which, we believe, can provide inspiration to marketing scholars.

Denying any relevance to reality has never been the only available option, and it may no longer be the most innovative. There is something more that will be pointed out in what follows: reference to reality, in philosophy, and elsewhere, enables us to elaborate interesting and effective concepts that would otherwise be unavailable, and to find alternative solutions to contemporary marketing problems, solutions that would

otherwise be precluded. Indeed, part of the allure of new theoretical proposals has always been their ability to let new phenomena appear, or to highlight new kinds of relations amongst already known phenomena. In reviewing the credentials of philosophical positions, vindicating the significance of reference to reality, it will be our concern to make out whether such reference enables us to envisage new types of phenomena or new types of hitherto ignored relations amongst them.

4 The Cultural Credit of Reference to Reality

One of the objections against the rehabilitation of reality might be that, even if philosophy or some other discipline may argue for the inconsistency of theories that deny the relevance of reality, the force of such arguments is confined to epistemological debates: the point is not whether it is epistemologically unacceptable to disregard reference to reality—which may be all good and well—but rather whether contemporary society has bidden farewell to reality and is therefore now interested in different kinds of approaches, regardless of their putative epistemological credentials.

If that were the case, then perhaps philosophical arguments and categories could be of little help to marketing theory and practice, which may be taken to focus on the ways in which beliefs are formed and justified, desires are formulated and expressed, and behavioural patterns emerge, rather than on the ways in which they are supposed to be or would be, if contemporary society were more epistemologically demanding than it is. If society has turned its back on reality, as some have been arguing (Rorty 1989; Vattimo 1989), then it might be the task of marketing scholars and practitioners to adapt to it, and to adopt all theoretical means they see fit to analyse it and interact with it as effectively as possible (Firat and Venkatesh 1993; Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995; Firat and Dholakia 2006). Although we believe that such a thesis would be an oversimplification, we shall address that issue, too, by pointing out counterexamples to such an interpretation of contemporary society.

We appreciate the contribution of philosophers, social scientists, and media theorists, who have underlined how radically communication technologies have changed the world over the past hundred years or so (Floridi 2014). However, we are very sceptical about the thesis that contemporary society has turned its back on reality. Indeed, we are glad to acknowledge the extraordinary contribution to philosophy and the social sciences by scholars who have investigated the role of spectacles, virtual worlds, and simulacra in contemporary societies (Baudrillard 1981, 1991). Nevertheless, we insist that the door should not be shut to reality and its role, and that reference to it still does play a role, and a growing one, in contemporary life. We leave it up to others to prophesy about what society will be like in, say, fifty years. What we, together with other prominent scholars, insist upon is that, no matter how mediated, constructed, virtual,

hyper-real, or however distant from more intuitive and traditional forms of reference to reality our lives become, such a reference will always play a crucial and inescapable role in human thought and behaviour.

5 Fruitfully Philosophical

This book is about the theoretical correctness of considering reference to reality as an important element of human experience and thought and about the fruitfulness, for marketing, of taking such a reference into account. The viability of the approach we propose will also be illustrated by pointing out a number of alternative or innovative philosophical categories, which cluster around reference to reality and which are effective notions for marketing research and practice. Such categories will be put to the test and measured against prominent competing theoretical tools and models with respect to selected topics in marketing research, such as value, authenticity, identity, participation, co-creation, relationship, experience, and perception. Our discussion will include the arts as well, because they may be (and perhaps have been) considered by some as the domains with the feeblest or least essential reference to reality and therefore as the very lion's den for perspectives such as the ones we are recommending.[2]

6 Credible Claims

Marketing scholars and practitioners may feel that reference to reality plays little or even no role in their discipline (Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995). In fact, it is sometimes claimed that marketing is about the sizzle, not the steak, and even less about the cow. That attitude, which associates marketing with an exclusive focus on appearances and persuasion, can be found amongst marketing specialists as well as amongst people with no professional interest in marketing or management proper. Sometimes, it even constitutes a reason to distrust marketing as a discipline or even to doubt its ethical acceptability.

Philosophers themselves at times fall prey to the linguistic inaccuracy of using the expression 'marketing' as just another word for a deliberate mis-portrayal of a situation aimed at manipulating someone to purchase something against their best interest (Vattimo 2012b). Moreover, and just as seriously, marketing specialists may feel conflicted about philosophers now drawing their attention to the relevance of reality after decades of apparently unanimous rejection of the value of such reference, as philosophically or epistemologically naïve, regressive, or even ideologically compromised (Rorty 1989; Vattimo 2012a).

Postmodernist philosophy considered itself as something of a new *koine* (Vattimo 1987). However, certain of its promoters may have retracted their earlier, more radical versions of antirealism (Ferraris 2012, 79–83, 106–111).

7 Marketing as a Farewell to Reality?

We understand the reasons for such possible incredulity on the side of many marketing researchers. However, we believe we can show that such incredulity rests upon a misrepresentation of the relevant philosophical debates, rather than upon conclusive theoretical grounds. In particular, we are aware of the powerful claim, famously made more than two decades ago by prominent scholars (Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995, 40) that marketing particularly thrives in societies in which culture has bidden farewell to the very "modernist idea that human social experience has fundamental 'real' bases" (notice the very bracketing of the expression 'real'), and even that, "from its very inception", marketing was a "precursor" to such a purported farewell from all contemporary culture to reality, and thus "to the larger society to come" (43): that marketing is "at the forefront" of a "transition" to an age in which reference to reality would play almost no role any more, or that it even "represents the essence" of such a transition that such a reality-free age to come would be "essentially a marketing age" (48).

Challenging the thesis that marketing as such is indissoluble from a farewell to reality and from an exclusive focus on appearances is amongst the theoretical aims of our work. However, our approach will not be meta-theoretical: we shall not mainly insist upon the age-old point, originally made by Plato (1997, *Timaeus*, 171a-b) and reformulated countless times, perhaps most prominently by Husserl (1900–1), that weakening the relation between theory, truth, and reality is fundamentally self-refuting and therefore irredeemably misguided. We shall not primarily insist that denying the relevance of reference to reality for a certain theory, including marketing theory, would be at odds with a formal requirement of theories in general, that is, their implicit or explicit claim to represent reality accurately. We believe that such arguments are, indeed, as strong as they intuitively sound;[3] however, they do not directly impact on the topic of this book. Our main point is not that marketing theory, as a type of theory, cannot deny the significance of reference to reality without becoming epistemologically inconsistent; it is rather that marketing has no good reason for denying the significance of reality in the first place and that such a denial is unjustified and counterproductive.

8 Philosophical Puzzlement

We are convinced that the philosophical tide has begun to turn. That is not the whole point, though: unlike a number of other publications in the philosophy of marketing with sympathy for truth and reality (e.g. Hunt 1993, 2003), and whose primary concern is a defence of the academic honourability of such notions, our main objective is the illustration of contexts in which a renewed awareness of the centrality of reference to

reality for human thought and behaviour could make a difference to the quality and fruitfulness of marketing field research. Our main objective is not to defend realism as a preconceived philosophical position, but rather to propose a theoretical alternative to a largely dominant paradigm in marketing research by indicating topics in which it would outdo its philosophical competitors.

9 Philosophy and Marketing

Philosophy can play different roles with respect to research in the social sciences. It can be a source of inspiration, a challenge to dominant assumptions and paradigms, an exploration of theoretical alternatives to mainstream models, a forge of ever-new conceptual toolboxes, and a demand for increased epistemic rigour. But philosophy can also become a repository of trite slogans, a factory of theoretical orthodoxies, or a catalogue of academic fashions. In what follows, we undertake to argue philosophically in favour of the following opportunities:

- exposing marketing and management research to the refreshing effect of reference to reality, after decades of antirealist attitude;
- providing a conceptual alternative for marketing researchers, after a long period dominated by a theoretical framework which has lost traction;
- challenging the credentials of a philosophical stance that is still largely accepted in the social sciences, although it has lost part of its intellectual strength;
- exploring the philosophical landscape in search of opportunities for marketing and management thought and in particular for new categories, reference points, research paradigms, and conceptual frameworks.

It is inevitable that dominant philosophical paradigms run out of innovative potential, perhaps even that their main theses become mere academic *mantras*. It is then all the more important to evaluate the state of a given philosophical perspective and to search for promising alternatives. This is what this book is about: an assessment of the declining trajectory of philosophical antirealism and an appraisal of the main opportunities introduced by the renewed attention on the significance of reference to reality that we have been witnessing over recent years.[4]

Leading marketing researchers have often engaged in epistemological debates, for example, regarding the foundations, purposes, and methods of their disciplines. Field research has often been inspired or influenced by classic or fashionable philosophical perspectives and even slogans, frequently adopting or adapting some of their categories, models, and strategies (Jones and Tadajewski 2018; Tadajewski, O'Shaughnessy, and

Hyman 2013, Vol. 2). Philosophy can be an influential hub for conceptual and linguistic innovations, and as such it can both promote genuine theoretical progress and launch short-lived academic fashions. For non-philosophers it may be even more difficult than for professional philosophers to estimate whether a certain philosophical position will stand the test of time or soon be archived as a passing fashion, but we would like our readers to keep their minds open for theoretical alternatives and to evaluate philosophical programmes also on the basis of their capacity to inspire and orient research.

The book consists of a first *pars destruens* and a second *pars construens*.

The *pars destruens* is dedicated to antirealism, both in philosophy and in marketing. In particular, Chapter 1 illustrates the main theses of antirealism in different respects; Chapter 2 is dedicated to the arguments and cultural reasons in favour of antirealism; Chapter 3 delves into the influence of antirealism upon leading marketing approaches and into the shortcomings suffered by those approaches deriving from that influence.

The second, longer, part of the book is its *pars construens*. In particular, Chapter 4 illustrates the main arguments against antirealism and in favour of a realist approach. Chapter 5 introduces eight case studies from different business contexts, in which the limits of an antirealist approach and the fruitfulness of a realist one are indicated *in concreto*. Readers who are particularly impatient to find out what conceptual instruments can derive from the adoption of a realist perspective, and do not want to wrestle their way through fastidious philosophical arguments first, may jump to the case studies at the end of Part 2; they do not presuppose the reading of the previous chapters, although the relevance of those proposals and their mutual consistency would be much better appreciated against the background of the previous chapters.

Notes

1. Cf. Dummett (1975), Tugendhat (1975), and, in a more open and problematic form, in Vattimo (1987).
2. The arts and aesthetic experience occupy a special position in contemporary debates, at the crossroads between philosophy and the social sciences. Cf. already Bubner (1989, 150); Featherstone (1991); Honneth (1994); and Welsch (1993).
3 "The worst objection that can be made to a theory . . ., is that it goes against the self-evident conditions for the possibility of a theory in general. To set up a theory whose content is explicitly or implicitly at variance with the propositions on which the sense and the claim to validity of all theory rests, is not merely wrong, but basically mistaken" (Husserl 1900–1, Ch. 7, § 32). Similar points are made in Nagel (1997, 15 *et passim*) and in Boghossian (2006, 53–54).
4. A sign of the times was Latour (2004). Reality has gained centre stage in different philosophical traditions. Cf. Benoist (2011, 2017); Gabriel (2014a); DeLanda and Harman (2017).

Part 1

Antirealism and Its Consequences

This first part is dedicated to an illustration and discussion of the denial of the significance of reference to reality, in philosophy, in the social sciences, and in marketing research and practice. Its purpose is to reconstruct the provenance, meaning, influence, and intellectual credentials of what is still a largely prevalent cultural attitude.

The attitude we are referring to is sometimes expressed by variations on the following themes: there are no facts, there are only interpretations (Nietzsche 1887b; Vattimo 2012a); whatever a community considers real is at bottom "socially constructed" (Latour 1998; Hacking 1999); human beliefs, discourses, and theories provide guidance for action and help cope with situations, but they do not—and cannot—aim to represent things as they are (Rorty 1989); nothing exists outside of some discourse or framework of reference (Carnap 1950; Derrida 1967b; Courtine 2015): "before you describe [something] as a dinosaur, or as anything else, there is no sense to the claim that it is 'out there' having properties"; "there is no description-independent way the world is" (Rorty 1998, 87, quoted in Boghossian 2006, 27).

Such theses, just like their opposites, are—and always have been—disputed (Wright 1987; Dummett 1991; Williamson 2004, 2006, 2015). Nevertheless, over the years, those theses have been embraced by broader and broader circles to the extent that today they are sometimes treated as irrefutable axioms of contemporary culture, rather than as thought-provoking but highly controversial claims: Gilmore and Pine (2007), for instance, dedicate a chapter to the "*Prevalence of Postmodernism: The Socially Constructed Reality*" and claim that "reality isn't what it used to be"; "beliefs are not objective truths about an objective world but rather socially constructed realities"; "there is no stable, unchanging, and unitary Real against which our thoughts can be tested" (18-ff. *et passim*). Conversely, alternatives are rarely considered as live options or are even ruled out as bordering on philosophical illiteracy.

In each phase of its long history, philosophy has hosted debates between different versions of those theses and of their negations (Williams 1978;

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Stroud 2000, 21–44).[1] The tension between the idea of reality, as existing independently of particular human perspectives, and its negation, the thought that everything is, in one way or another, relative to or depending upon some perspective, is found outside philosophy too, most notably, but not exclusively, in various religious texts and traditions (Jaspers 1949; Bellah and Joas 2012). However, the last third of the twentieth century has witnessed a culturally unprecedented success of the negation of the existence of reality to the extent that such a negation seems to have become a cultural mantra in certain circles (Ferraris 2012), or even a commonplace, permeating the arts, popular culture, and everyday language.

The prevalence of antirealism has been correctly associated with the rise and cultural success of Postmodernism, both in philosophy and in cultural circles more generally (Searle 1995, 158–159; Ferraris 2012, Ch. 1; Eco 2014); the battle against antirealism has, therefore, sometimes been intended as a campaign against Postmodernism as such (Benoist 2011).[2] Our critique of the theses that there is no reality, that there are no facts, no way things are, to which human thoughts and behaviour relate, partly overlaps with a critique of certain aspects of Postmodernism. However, it is postmodernist antirealism that is criticised and not Postmodernism as such, that is, as a cluster of approaches and theses regarding the status of knowledge in contemporary societies, the rise and fall of overarching narratives, the most significant historical dynamics in our time, and so forth (Lyotard 1979).

The following chapters reconstruct some aspects of the rise of antirealism, in philosophy and in marketing, and indicate its cultural motivations and its weak points, both as a philosophical position and as an assumption for marketing, by pointing out theoretical counterarguments and limitations imposed by antirealist assumptions on marketing research.

1 What Went Wrong With Reality

1.1 Theoretical Dilemmas

In the second half of the twentieth century, leading philosophers, sociologists, semiologists, and media theorists rejected some of the assumptions upon which the relevance of reference to reality had long rested (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Barthes 1964; Rorty 1979):

i. the thesis that all thought, representation, discourse, and knowledge (in their informal, formalised, and even institutionalised versions) involve a reference to reality and possibly a manifestation thereof;
ii. the thesis that reality exists at all.[3]

Points (i) and (ii) are different, although they are intertwined.[4] In particular, those who deny that there is a way things are, independently of any human perspective, may be challenged by their opponents to not only produce convincing arguments in support of antirealism *per se* but also develop credible accounts of thought, language, and knowledge that do not make any reference to an independently existing reality or to its possible manifestation—including accounts of the intuitive distinctions between true and false beliefs, accurate and inaccurate representations, veridical and mendacious communications, and between genuine knowledge and mere justified belief.[5]

Conversely, realists, who claim that there exists a reality that veridical perception, true belief, accurate representation, sincere communication, and genuine knowledge, all refer to, or manifest, may be challenged by their opponents to indicate in what way reality itself could ever play a direct or straightforward role in belief formation, perception, representation, communication, or knowledge, and how reality could be distinguished from mere illusion, appearance, lie, or error, if not through the mediation of beliefs, perceptions, representations, signs, communications, or reasons (Dummett 1963, 2006; Davidson 1983, 1987; Rorty 1990a; McDowell 1994; Abel 1995, 2004, 173–208).

Without reference to reality, it seems hard to understand the very point of perception, belief, communication, representation, and knowledge: "We

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all have a conception of things being a certain way independently of their being believed to be that way" (Stroud 2000, 22). It is, in fact, noteworthy, that antirealism tends (with notable exceptions) to prefer interpreting human relations with the world in terms of interpretation rather than cognition, language rather than perception, reasoning rather than referring, justification rather than knowledge (Abel 1999). At its best, at least, cognition appears to point at something existing regardless of it: "knowledge is of a reality which exists independently of that knowledge, and indeed . . . independently of any thought or experience. Knowledge is of what is there *anyway*" (Williams 1978, 64, emphasis in the original).[6]

Conversely, reference to reality is not an easy phenomenon to account for, as reality, whatever it may be like, is something with which we are acquainted through typically robust patterns in perception, action, habit, thought, knowledge, communication, representation. Antirealists may insist on this latter purported puzzle, related to experience and even to perception: we do distinguish dreaming from waking experiences (Malcolm 1956, 1959), perceiving from hallucinating (Husserl 1913; Austin 1962b; Martin 2006; Bower 2020), and knowledge from false belief (Wittgenstein 1969; Williamson 2000). However, we do not seem to distinguish dreams from waking experiences, hallucinations from perceptions, and true knowledge from mere belief, by comparing them—dreams, hallucinations, and false beliefs on one side, waking experiences, genuine perceptions, and authentic knowledge on the other—with a reality that we have independent access to and by assessing which ones of them match it and which do not. In fact, it is open to dispute whether there is any possibility of carrying out such an operation, that is, to jump outside mental life (as the idea is sometimes expressed by antirealists) and compare some of it (a dream, a perception, a hallucination, an observation, an experiment, a belief, a theory) with reality itself.

Moreover, antirealists may claim that, if reality exists independently of human experience and knowledge, comparison of beliefs and statements with reality must be impossible because of their incommensurability (Nietzsche 1870; 1980; Husserl 1929; Wittgenstein 1953, § 95; McDowell 1994, 24–45); hence, comparison with reality does not appear to be an easy task to carry out, to discern what thoughts, experiences, or theories are true, false, accurate, mistaken, or hallucinatory. If reality is independent of all experience, we are cut off from it, so all we can do—it may be claimed—is rely upon the vividness and consistency of our own experiences and to distinguish, so to speak, "from within" our mental life, between experiences that can be taken as representing reality and those that we consider as mere appearances, hallucinations, dreams, or mistakes:

> Experience is not an opening through which a world, existing prior to all experience, shines into a room of consciousness. . . . For how

> could I make a rational statement to that effect, without seeing such a state-of-affairs and therefore seeing not only consciousness but also the something alien to consciousness—that is: *experiencing* the alien affair?
>
> (Husserl 1929, Eng. tr. 232–233, emphasis in the original)

This is, and always was, one of the most powerful reservations about the idea that, if thought and meaning are to be understood, reference to reality is unavoidable—and one of the stalking horses of sophisticated antirealism (Abel 1995, 447–461).

Other arguments against realism pivot upon scepticism about the idea that a reality conceived of as independent of human thought may have properties and relations that exactly match the conditions expressed by historically contingent linguistic predicates or that it may contain facts that match the conditions expressed by propositions in natural languages (Searle 1995, 161–166; Boghossian 2006; Varzi 2011): a reality independent of human thought and language is considered incommensurable with human—all too human—statements, theories, or beliefs.

1.2 Postmodernism

Postmodernism cannot by any means be reduced to a mere set of antirealist theses: to begin with, it is not a school with an orthodoxy, but rather a constellation of authors and positions, whose work ranges from philosophy proper to art criticism, critical theory, management, literary hermeneutics, gender studies, and beyond. Nevertheless, Postmodernism has produced fresh and challenging arguments against the idea that reference to reality plays an intellectually respectable or even inescapable role, and, even more notably, it has penetrated non-academic culture to a much deeper extent than any previous antirealist philosophy.

The expression 'postmodern' does not, per se, evoke antirealism, but rather a series of semantic associations with modernism, modernity, and their trajectory: in particular, an overcoming or torsion of certain purportedly modern cultural tenets (Lyotard 1979; Vattimo and Rovatti 1983), such as:[7]

i. belief in cultural and social emancipation through the institutionalised exercise of rationality (philosophy, critique, science);
ii. belief in some kind of teleology, governing historical (social, cultural, economic) processes;
iii. belief in the possibility of producing a unified rational account of all reality, including social and political reality;
iv. belief in the superiority of a culture governed by formalised and institutionalised rationality (logic, science, mathematics), as compared with other possible forms of culture;

v. belief in rationality (coherence, consistence, self-consciousness) as the defining trait of humanity.

The rejection of these five theses does not by itself entail the negation of the relevance of reference to reality. However, as a consequence of the rejection of (iii.), authors associated with the postmodernist movement often subscribe to the view that, after abandoning the claim that there could be some kind of "grand narrative" which can aspire to be the one legitimate or authorised description of reality, what contemporary cultures are left with is a variety of possibly conflicting accounts, none of which may be considered as more legitimate than the others or preferred on the basis of some valid or shared (or self-proclaimed) meta-theoretical criterion (Lyotard 1979). Once we have lost our belief in the possible existence of one correct description of reality, we may feel legitimated to accept the proliferation of different if not incompatible interpretations in philosophical and scientific debates (Vattimo 1985a, 1987, 1989), without feeling committed to the idea of their accurately representing an independently existing reality. Further, claims to represent an independently existing reality may come under attack by postmodernist thinkers for passing off ideological narratives as unbiased representations of the way things are (cf. *infra*); the very attitude of trying to describe an independently existing reality may be viewed as ethically suspicious, as opposed to the admission that every discourse is rooted not in things themselves, but in specific interests, perspectives, and cultural strategies. Rejecting the idea of a possible reference to an independently existing reality becomes, thus, part of a political agenda, which considers realism as a tormenting cultural "temptation" (Vattimo 2012a, Ch. 4) and militates for an "ethical dissolution of reality" (Ch. 8).

1.3 No Reality, More Precisely

Postmodernism is sometimes considered as the philosophical orthodoxy of the globalised culture that emerged from the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Postmodernism's questioning of the very notions of reality, objectivity, and of official versions of the way things are appears to both critics and supporters to be a philosophical counterpart to the age of media, consumerism, and globalised neoliberalism (Habermas 1985; Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995; Ferraris 2012).

The idea that reference to reality is either irrelevant or impossible is strongly associated with Postmodernism, much more than with any other antirealist philosophical movement of the past (Ferraris 2012; Benoist 2017, 7–13). In fact, thanks to its intellectual and social fecundity, Postmodernism has brought Gorgias's ancient theses—there is nothing, and even if there were a being or reality, it would be irrelevant to thought, communication, and understanding (Sprague 2001, DK-3)—to

be accepted in broader and broader circles of contemporary society (cf. Williams 2002, 1–19; Williamson 2017 for an informal discussion).

The rejection of the idea that there is a reality[8] is often framed in more technically sophisticated or specific terms than those expressed in the blunt statement that reality does not exist. The most common reformulation of such rejection is the claim that there is no way things are that is independent of any possible perspective, interpretation, or experience; alternatively, that everything that counts as real is in one way or another inextricably related to its being interpreted, perceived, experienced, conjectured, proved, or accepted; that the (linguistic, conceptual, social, conventional, historical, institutional) context or framework in which something comes to count or be accepted as real cannot be abstracted away as extrinsic or indifferent to its actually being real or existing in a certain way; accordingly, that, if it is understood as totally independent of any particular context or framework of experience, reality is an illusion.

Framed in these terms, the claim that no reality exists may look like a sensible qualification to the absolutist-sounding expectation that what we consider as real, in personal, social, scientific, and institutional contexts, is totally independent of our experiencing or encountering it from any particular perspective, and that it would be exactly as we consider it to be even if no human being or other intelligent being had ever existed.[9]

It is quite surprising that the thesis that no reality exists could work its way into academia and popular culture. In fact, the claim that reality exists, so directly formulated, appears so irrefutable, perhaps even trivial, that its negation may seem to be a nonsense. Indeed, only few radical thinkers, and in particularly provocative contexts, have denied that claim in a straightforward manner. Some have even maintained that it is not a claim at all, but rather the prerequisite framework for any specific thesis.[10] The idea is, therefore, typically reformulated in slightly less direct terms: that there is a reality is reformulated as the idea that there is something independent of any particular way it is, or can be, encountered: for example, perceived, experienced, named, described, or conceptualised. Such a reformulation is usually accepted by its proponents too (Nagel 1997; Boghossian 2006) as a reasonable articulation of a thesis which may otherwise appear empty or shallow.

That reality exists is taken to mean, or at least to entail, that something exists which is independent of any particular perception, interpretation, expectation, theory, convention, or conceptualisation. Something that is simply out there: it can be encountered, discovered, perceived, and even thought or talked about more or less correctly, described more or less accurately, but it is simply there and it would be there even if no one had ever encountered it, or thought about it, or known it, and even if no human being had ever existed (Williams 1978; Searle 1995; Meillassoux 2006). Moreover, it is claimed that it can be encountered and experienced in certain ways, *because* it is simply there and is the way it is. For instance,

"Mountains and fish could have existed and could have been just as they are now even if human beings had never come along" (Stroud 2000, 24). The sun, the moon, rocks, oceans are simply out there. Or so the claim goes.

1.4 The Claim Challenged

The claim that there is a way things are, independent of any particular perspective, might be considered as less universally compelling than the more straightforward one, that is, than the thesis that there exists a reality. In fact, it seems almost formally contradictory to claim that reality does not exist, or that there is no reality, because it could appear as equivalent to the claim that reality is not real—which in turn may be equated to the idea that what is real is not real (hence that there is something that is both real and not-real).

Compared to that degree of counter-intuitiveness (some would call it nonsense), it seems much less problematic to claim that nothing is what it is, and how it is, independently of the particular ways in which it is or can be perceived, experienced, named, described, or conceptualised. As Rorty (1990b, 5) once wrote, "it is no truer that 'atoms are what they are because we use "atom" as we do' than that 'we use "atom" as we do because atoms are as they are'".

Some have even found the claim that there is a way things are which is beyond the way they are experienced, as "abstruse" (Hume 1739, Book 1, Part iv), as the "delusion that observations could be made without an observer" (von Foerster quoted in von Glasersfeld 1995), or have even claimed that contemporary science, for example, quantum mechanics, questions the existence of certain well-known physical phenomena outside any possible observation framework (Putnam 1990, 3–17); hence, the idea of independence from any possible perspective or experience is problematic (Hume 1739),[11] or even contradictory (Berkeley 1710; Gentile 1916).[12]

Thus reformulated, the claim that no reality exists amounts to the still challenging, but perhaps less shocking, claim that there is nothing whose existence and features are completely independent of any particular way in which they may manifest themselves or be encountered. That there is no "*hors-texte*" (Derrida 1967b, Eng. tr. 159),[13] but that everything is in one way or another related to a possible mode of perception, context of experience, conceptual framework, scientific setting or method, cultural background, or similar.

In fact, antirealism can be reformulated in terms that are reassuring, rather than provocative: if reality is interpreted not just as excluding the typical forms of deviant experience with which we are all acquainted (illusion, error, hallucination, dream, misidentification, misrepresentation, miscalculation), but rather as excluding any possible mode of appearance

or context of manifestation whatsoever, then the existence of reality sounds like a philosophically demanding position rather than like an intuitive assumption. Thus reversed, it is the claim that there is a reality that appears as perhaps too demanding a position or even as a suspicious form of absolutism. In fact, postmodernist antirealists often associate the idea of reality with what they call "ontotheological" assumptions, that is, metaphysical assumptions deriving from a specific philosophical and theological tradition that we have no good reason for subscribing to (Derrida 1971; Harman 2005, 115).

What happens when we have effective experiences, for example, when we perceive something in standard conditions, believe something based on reliable evidence, or become convinced of something, as a consequence of a demonstration? Are we not, then, in touch with a reality which is independent of us? Are all these circumstances not signs that one is not merely in touch with one's own thoughts or with widespread conventions or habits, but rather with an independently existing reality? Opponents of this view may insist that what happens when we think we are in touch with a reality that exists independently is rather that certain typical features of experience, thought, perception—and not of an independently existing reality—are present. So, one of the paradoxes of reference to reality seems to be that what makes us convinced of being in touch with reality, and thus of its existence and independence of us, seems to be something constitutively depending upon us. All that we ever perceive, experience, talk about, discuss, represent, examine is encountered through some mode of appearance or presentation, manifestation, and communication. Meillassoux (2006, Eng. tr. 5) calls "correlationism" "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other". Correlationism is a "current of thought which maintains the unsurpassable character of the correlation so defined" (*ibid.*).[14]

1.5 "The Nietzsche Effect"[15]

The idea that there is a reality has been periodically questioned, from the Sophists onwards, but the author who has exerted the most powerful influence upon contemporary culture, and more specifically upon postmodern philosophy at large, with respect to this issue, is certainly Nietzsche.

Nietzsche's work inspired most of the philosophers associated with the postmodernist movement or considered to be amongst its main sources (Heidegger 1961; Deleuze 1962; Foucault 1971b; Derrida 1972b; Vattimo 1985a, 1985b; Michels 2020). In fact, Postmodernism may be associated with the very "Nietzsche Renaissance" which took place in the last third of the twentieth century (Descombes 1979; Ferraris 1989).

The classical formulations of the idea that there exists no reality, out there, independent of any interpretation and a thoroughgoing reflection upon the consequences of such an assumption can be found in the writings of Nietzsche himself (1887b, 1901), although, as Williams (2002) pointed out almost two decades ago (280 n. 10), Nietzsche never actually published the very one radical fragment which is most often quoted by postmodernist thinkers, that is, "facts are precisely what there are not, only interpretations" (Vattimo 2012a).

In another famous passage, Nietzsche (1889) tells a story about "*How 'the Real World' Finally Became a Fable*"; he subtitles it as "*History of an Error*". Nietzsche's narrative is famously about how an erroneous (and cowardly) belief in the existence of a real world, a reality behind or underneath the manifold and changing appearances populating experience, first made its appearance, then received cultural acclaim, and finally, but slowly, lost credit. Reality, according to Nietzsche's story, has become a fable: the belief in the existence of such a thing as reality at all has lost credibility.

The "quest for reality", or "the will to truth", as Nietzsche (1886) sometimes calls it, is substituted by a "will to power" (1886), and by a genealogy of the very notion(s) of (truth and) reality and of the belief in it (them): an investigation of the provenance of the faith in reality's relevance, in its ethical and social significance, and in its right to orient human thought and behaviour. The philosophical attempt to discuss the arguments supporting the belief in the existence of a reality behind or under appearances ought to be substituted, according to Nietzsche, by a description of the kind of humanity, of psychological and social constitution and dispositions, underpinning the historical emergence of such a belief.

In Nietzschean terms, the question is no longer what reasons we can or do have to believe in the existence of reality, but rather what inclines us to hope that there can be one at all. Nietzsche's diagnosis is, as we know, merciless: the belief in reality, in the stability of things—in logic itself—is a symptom of social decadence and psychological weakness.[16] The inclination to consider realism as the product of a defective intellectual attitude comes back in postmodernist Nietzscheanism. Through the reprises of Nietzsche's theses by postmodernist thinkers (Vattimo 2012a, Eng. tr. 55), such views found their way into philosophy, mass culture, and scholarship. It is revealing that Nietzsche's rejection of realism rests upon the questioning of its purported moral and psychological underpinnings, even more than upon purely theoretical reasons. Indeed, as we shall see, postmodernist suspicions about realism partly rest upon a post-Nietzschean psychological and moral prejudice against realism as an attitude. Such a moral prejudice is so strong that, as Searle (1995) claims, when it comes to postmodernist attacks on realism, "Sometimes no clearly stated arguments are even presented" (158). It is all the more

significant that, in discussing Nietzsche's unpublished *dictum* "facts are precisely what there are not, only interpretations", Vattimo (2012a, Eng. tr. 17) insisted that it ought not to be considered as a statement of fact: "this too is an interpretation".[17]

1.6 Problems with Reality

Postmodernist thinkers reject realism also on moral and political grounds: they often accuse realists of conservatism and resistance to change: "if realism is simply the conservation of objective data that philosophy must recognize, politics submit to, and faith cherish, it can only triumph within a framed democracy, that is, where transformation and change are almost impossible" (Vattimo and Zabala 2011, 27). Postmodernists allege that believing in the existence of an independent reality turns human dialogue and experience into a discovery and a mirroring of the way things (purportedly) are, rather than understanding them as an active contribution to the production of a shared world (Feyerabend 1978; Rorty 1990c). More specifically, realists are sometimes accused by postmodernists of illegitimately mistaking what are in fact contingent products of historical, cultural, and linguistic habits for independent matters of fact which cannot be changed (Rorty 1990d; Hacking 1999, 15–35). In this sense, realists are accused of committing two capital philosophical sins: hypostasis and reification (cf. *infra*).

Following Nietzsche, postmodernist thinkers (Vattimo 2012a) consider the belief in the existence of reality as the product of a somewhat defective, even morbid, psychological constitution or culture, a constitution that makes it difficult for one to accept life's constant change and instability. Such a defective psychological and social make-up is more at ease in considering its interpretations as statements of fact rather than in accepting the responsibility of frankly presenting them as proposals rooted in a concrete network of personal and social assumptions, prejudices, and interests (Gadamer 1960).

Postmodernists remind realists of the responsibility of any possible theory with respect to the phenomena it purports to describe. On occasion, they accuse realists of embracing a somewhat violent worldview in which an independently existing reality (purportedly identified with official narratives) imposes itself upon any particular dissent or reservation and excludes the possibility of reaching an agreement with others about what to consider a shared sense of experiences through open and unpredictable dialogue and negotiation. The idea that a reality exists which is independent of any particular interpretation or perspective is rejected as ethically dangerous by postmodernists because, in their opinion, it promises some kind of access to reality that is independent of dialogue and agreement (cf. Habermas 1999; Apel 2001), and it potentially authorises one to impose what one considers as reality onto others, regardless of

their possible disagreement. In this sense, realism (and realists) are sometimes accused by postmodernists of two moral defects: violence (imposing their view) and cowardice (needing to posit a stable reality behind the world of appearances).

Realists typically reply to postmodernists that the belief that there is a way things are, independently of anyone's perspective or position, does not coincide at all with the claim of already knowing how they are; hence, it should be distinguished from authoritarianism or dogmatism; they add that an awareness of the difference between independently existing reality and perspectives on it is a precious critical tool that can be used against possibly dominant communicative manipulations (Ferraris 2015b). They also add that, in the absence of such an awareness, what prevails is not dialogue and free agreement but rather cynicism, media manipulation, and mystification, justified by the conviction that, as there is no way things are—no fact of the matter—any possible perspective or version is as legitimate as it could possibly be. If reality is not the measure of correct speech, then persuasiveness will be; but persuasiveness, in the absence of a strong reference to reality, might boil down to communicative manipulation:

> The real world has certainly become a tale or, rather . . . it became a reality show; but the outcome was media populism. . . . In news broadcasts and talk shows we did witness the realm of the "no facts, only interpretations" that—in what unfortunately is a fact and not an interpretation—then showed its true meaning: "the argument of the strongest is always the best".
>
> (Ferraris 2012, 3)

1.7 Irony, Constructionism, Relativism

Postmodernists often show a significant degree of suspicion with respect to such notions as rationality, objectivity, matters of fact, science, and also nature, being, truth, and validity. Every notion or concept that suggests the existence of criteria, norms, or states of affairs, independent of any convention, agreement, or perspective, tends to be regarded by postmodernists as a hypostatisation, a superstition, an unauthorised assumption. Postmodernist authors prefer to shift attention from purported entities, facts, objects, states of affairs, natural kinds, and the like, to social conventions or constructions, that is, to the contingent practices and linguistic habits correlated to their being experienced and understood.

In Postmodernism, the notion of reality does not disappear but rather receives an ironic qualification, alongside many other notions. Following Heidegger and Gadamer, most postmodernist thinkers declare that it is impossible to get rid of words and notions (such as 'reality', for instance) inherited from a long philosophical tradition (e.g. from what is sometimes

disdainfully called "metaphysics") and that the renewal of philosophy ought to be understood not as a surpassing (*Überwindung*) of that tradition but rather as a torsion (*Verwindung*).

In Rorty's (1989) words, a (postmodernist) "ironist" is not someone who rejects a received vocabulary to adopt a fresh and uncompromising one, but rather

> someone who fulfils three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realises that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophises about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself.
>
> (73)

Postmodernism chooses to use the word 'reality' in brackets, along with other concepts it considers problematic ('truth', 'objectivity', 'fact', 'rational', 'subject', 'science').

Reality, or rather "reality", that is, what used to be called so, or what is so-called by non-postmodernist thinkers, still appears in many postmodernist texts, in brackets, that is, in a non-committal sense. Ironic bracketing is not a mere stylistic device but rather marks off the focus of postmodernist thought on correlation, constitution, and construction, rather than on things themselves. The same counts for "truth", which ends up bracketed, becoming what is typically accepted as true in a given context; for "objectivity", which becomes what is typically considered as valid independently of any particular perspective, in a given context; for "facts", which are considered as something that can be ascertained by anyone, in a specific context; for "rationality", which becomes what is considered as consistent with some purportedly valid principles, in a given context; and for "science", which becomes what is accepted on the basis of certain socially institutionalised and formalised cognitive practices. Postmodernism's rejection of the idea of an independent reality leads thinkers to reject the possibility of dismissing a vocabulary as objectively mistaken: the very idea of a more or less accurate vocabulary, with respect to reality, is itself considered as sympathetic with a realist worldview.

Postmodernism's usual strategy is Nietzschean: rather than addressing the issue of reality straightforwardly, in its different contexts, it investigates the contingent conventions, habits, linguistic practices, and social institutions that make different types and aspects of socially shared experience intelligible; for example, the correlation between the "reality" of mental illness as a socially recognised phenomenon and the existence of medical practices and institutions, between the "reality" of gender as a

social taxonomy and the existence of political institutions and beliefs; but also between epidemics as socially attested phenomena ("realities") and the existence of medical and biological institutions and practices.[18] Everything that is considered real in a certain context is reduced by Postmodernism to the peculiar conventions and rules governing its counting as such.

Paradoxically, perhaps, Postmodernism does not distinguish sharply between social reality (e.g. the reality of languages, currencies, traditions, interest rates, contracts, political institutions, loans, laws, firms, credits, texts, brands, addresses, licences, patents, and all sorts of conventions) and other types of reality that are usually considered as independent of any particular habit or social convention, or even of the very existence of human beings (e.g. galaxies, planets, electrons, mountains, bacilli, deserts, earthquakes, and the like). The postmodernist attitude tends to consider all reality as somehow social, that is, socially constructed (Hacking 1999) or perspective-relative. Indeed, it is claimed that

> The thesis according to which "Being, that can be understood, is language" cannot . . . be applied exclusively to the realm of the human sciences. . . . [I]t must be said that every "fact" is the product of an interpretation.
>
> (Vattimo 2012a, Eng. tr. 18, the quotation is from Gadamer 1960, Eng. tr. 474)

Moreover: "The natural sciences are developed only within the horizon of language that is naturally inherited with the same historical constitution of our being-in-the-world, namely, within that prior opening that conditions every experience and, therefore, constitutes its unavoidably interpretative character" (19).

Unlike Husserlian phenomenology, and Kantian critical philosophy before it—both of which are examples of "correlationism", but insist upon the existence of rigid universal correlations between realities and features of subjective (or intersubjective) experiences—postmodernist authors do not point at transcendental structures: they rather investigate correlations between the socially acknowledged "existence" of certain "realities" and the radically contingent social conventions that underpin them. The term usually employed to refer to such theoretical attitude is "constructionism" (Hacking 1999; Boghossian 2006), that is, the thesis that all "reality" is socially constructed.

Indeed, this shift from reality to its modes of presentation, and from purportedly necessary to radically contingent institutional and conventional modes of presentation, has led many postmodernist thinkers to embrace various forms of relativism, that is, of the idea that all "reality" is relative to some specific contingent context and that radically different cultural contexts may construct incompatible versions of what may count

as "real", without there being any objective fact of the matter as to which one of them, if any, is correct or true (Boghossian 2006). It is, instead, claimed, coherently with the main thesis of Postmodernism, that the expressions "true" and "correct" themselves function only within specific linguistic and cultural frameworks and cannot be used across contexts or cultures to assess—by independent standards or criteria—whether an account produced by one of them is better than that produced by another (Rorty 1989). The same line of reasoning applies not only to social sciences but also to natural sciences and the "realities" they talk about.

1.8 From Reality to Genealogy

Questioning the very notion of reality, and systematically investigating the conventions governing its ascription to certain phenomena or notions, entails a radical transformation in the fundamental intellectual attitude of researchers, both inside and outside philosophy. Instead of investigating whether a certain concept is exemplified in reality, whether there is something in reality corresponding to that concept, philosophers, semiologists, sociologists, media theorists, and a number of other thinkers ask about the social conditions of the recognition of that purported entity as something real, of its inscription in the realm of reality, in a certain social context.

Perceptions, representations, symbols, languages, interpretations, but also conventions, habits, institutions, methods, and practices lose their traditionally negative role as sources of possible bias or prejudice with respect to an independently existing reality: in postmodernist philosophy, they take up a productive and constructive (or at least constitutive) function, as forges of "realities", that is, of accepted versions of what there is, because constructed reality is as "real" as anything can be.

Occasionally, those practices and conventions fall under suspicion, when they are regarded as sources of ethically or politically unpalatable "realities"; for example, mental illnesses, traditional gender distinctions, regressive national identities, racial features, and the like (Hacking 1999). Instead of aiming at a straightforward account—or negation—of the relevant phenomena, Postmodernism produces genealogies of notions, reports about how contingent social events, habits, conventions, and institutions brought about the proclamation of specific purported "realities" (cf. Hacking 1975, 1990).

It is perhaps especially in this context that Postmodernism showed its fruitfulness for social sciences, giving an impulse to cultural studies, media studies, postcolonial studies, gender studies, and a number of other disciplines, whose main concern is the investigation of the development and structure of the social conventions and practices governing the acceptance of specific sets of beliefs as pretended representations of an independently existing reality, for example, of "the Orient", "the Feminine", "the

Aesthetic Dimension", "National Identity", "Mental Illness", "Homosexuality", and also "Leisure", "Work", "Science", "Public Opinion" (Hacking 1999).

Postmodernism does more: it encourages the investigation of how the modes of certification, proclamation, and inscription of notions in the domain of accepted "reality", for one society, are not just given once and for all, but they are subject to constant revision and update and are conditioned by political and social transformations (cf. the seminal Detienne [1967]), media innovations, and technological revolutions, to mention only a few aspects (Baudrillard 1981, 1991).

Postmodernism has uncovered a vast field of scholarly enquiry, but at the same time it has ventured into dangerous territory by denying the very existence of reality and by claiming that there is nothing that anyone can ever get to beyond forms and rules of social construction, language games, signs, icons, and conventions. According to the most influential postmodernist thinkers, experience and perception are not encounters with reality but are rather processes of production, constitution, or construction of what is thus considered. Phenomena are not manifestations of reality, but rather, conversely, what counts as real for a particular individual, society, culture, period, class, etc., is determined by, or depends upon, the particular features of perception, experience, language, institutionalised discourse, and so forth.

Notes

1. The idea of something being in a certain way independent of any perspective was expressed in one of its canonical forms by Democritus: "by convention sweet and by convention bitter, by convention hot, by convention cold, by convention color; but in reality atoms and void" (Taylor 1999, DK 68B9); the canonical expression of the opposite view is Protagoras's claim that "Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are that they are and of the things that are not that they are not" (Sprague 2001, DK 80B1).
2. "La perspective défendue c'est alors que nous n'avons jamais affaire qu'à des représentations et que l'idée de "chose" est à reverser au compte des mythes philosophiques. Cette "chose" qui dépasserait les représentations ou en tout cas ne se réduirait pas à elles, ne serait, en fin de compte, qu'une représentation de plus, et une dont on nous invite à nous débarrasser comme de notre dernière illusion. Tel est le principe de ce qu'on pourrait appeler anti-réalisme (post-)moderne" (Benoist 2011, 19).
3. Searle (1995, 149-ff.) argues against "the current philosophical scene in which it is common both to deny the existence of a reality independent of human representations and to deny that true statements correspond to facts" (149–150). Cf. also Couldry and Hepp (2016).
4. Reformulations of the interconnection between such issues can be found in Davidson (1973); Wright (1994); Katz (1990, 1998); Peacocke (1999, 2019). A partial overlap between ontological and epistemological issues is to be found since the times of ancient Greek philosophy.
5. Interestingly, the distinction between knowledge and justified belief is blurred by some notable antirealist thinkers. Cf. the classic Rorty (1979, 170): "we

understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation"; or "we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature" (171).

6. Please note that reality's independence of human knowledge is indicated by Williams as an aspect of the very notion of knowledge.
7. There are countless lists of the supposedly defining features of Postmodernism and of the purported tenets of modernity that such a movement questions. We are not making any claim as to the exhaustiveness of our own list.
8. We prefer to keep using the expression 'reality', although we agree with Austin (1962b, Ch. 8) that "unlike 'yellow' or 'horse' or 'walk', it does not have one single, specifiable, always-the-same *meaning*" (emphasis in the original).
9. Sometimes, the claim that reality is in a way relative to a description is formulated by philosophers who subscribe to realist programmes as well. Cf. for instance, Benoist (2011, 61), who claims that "de telles déterminations renvoient à la seule 'nécessité' . . . de décrire le réel de telle ou telle façon et donc ne sont pas indépendantes de ce que nous avons appelé un 'point de vue'".
10. Husserl (1913, Sec. II, Ch. 1) famously maintained that the existence of the world could be regarded, at least in some sense, as a proper thesis, endorsed in both ordinary and scientific contexts (Giannasi 2011). He called it the "thesis of natural attitude". Carnap (1950) denied that the existence of reality could be the content of a thesis. Similar issues are discussed in Austin (1962b) and in Wittgenstein (1969). Cf. Perissinotto (2016).
11. Cf. Hume (1739, 189): "That our senses offer not their impressions as the images of something *distinct*, or *independent*, and *external*, is evident". "For philosophy informs us, that every thing, which appears to the mind, is nothing but a perception, and is interrupted, and dependent on the mind; whereas the vulgar confound perceptions and objects, and attribute a distinct continu'd existence to the very things they feel or see" (193); "we may well suppose in general, but 'tis impossible for us distinctly to conceive, objects to be in their nature any thing but exactly the same with perceptions" (218).
12. "It is indeed an opinion strangely prevailing amongst men, that houses, mountains, rivers, and in a word all sensible objects have an existence, natural or real, distinct from their being perceived by the understanding. But with how great an assurance and acquiescence soever this principle may be entertained in the world; yet whoever shall find it in his heart to call it in question, may, if I mistake not, perceive it to involve a manifest contradiction" (Berkeley 1710, 104).
13. The original claim ("Il n'y a pas de hors-texte") is often translated as "there is nothing outside of the text", although it does not exactly mean that. Searle (1995, 160) argues that Derrida, subsequently, "takes it all back: he says that all he meant by the apparently spectacular declaration that there is nothing outside of *texts* is the banality that everything exists in some context or other". His reference is to Derrida (1988, 136).
14. In a similar vein, Harman (2011b) criticises "philosophies of (human) access"; Cf. Young (2020). Correlationism and the philosophies of human access are largely sympathetic with post-Kantian philosophy, whose legacy is discussed in Ferraris (2004).
15. We are deliberately quoting the title of a chapter of Vattimo (2012a, 17), dedicated to the importance of Nietzsche's fragment: "facts are precisely what there are not, only interpretations", to understand the relationship between hermeneutics and nihilism. Nietzsche's aphorism is a note from 1886–7. See Nietzsche (1887b, Eng. tr. N. 7 [60], 139).

16. The inclination to consider realism as the product of a defective intellectual attitude comes back in postmodernist forms of Nietzscheanism, too: "I speak about the 'temptation' of realism because, as with true temptations, it is something that returns and torments us" (Vattimo 2012a, Eng. tr. 55).
17. Vattimo (2012a, 17): "it is clear that the claim could not be put forward as the description of a fact, as a metaphysical proposition about reality that would be constituted 'objectively' by interpretations and not by facts".
18. Latour (1998) famously claims that Ramses II could not have died of tuberculosis, because the respective bacilli were discovered only in 1882.

2 The Postmodernist Challenge to Realism

In what follows, we shall set out the most widespread postmodernist reservations regarding reality and indicate something of the reasons underlying those reservations.

2.1 Epistemological Reservations: Realism as Inconsistence

Some postmodernist antirealists question the very epistemological soundness of positing a reality independent of any perspective (Rorty 1979, 315–356). In doing so, they radicalise classic arguments developed by modern empiricism and transcendental idealism (Ferraris 2015a). One of the sources of their position is the famous Kantian claim that "intuitions without concepts are blind" (Kant (1781/1787, A51/B75; Ferraris 2009, Ch. 2): a claim that is (perhaps mistakenly) interpreted as suggesting that, in order for something to be experienced by a subject, it must be conceptualised by that subject in some way or another,[1] that a subject can only experience what it can understand,[2] or that what is experienced by a subject radically depends upon the notions that subject uses to conceptualise it (Rorty 1979, 257–312).

Unlike Kant, though, and following Nietzsche (but also, in different ways, widespread interpretations of Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Foucault, and others), postmodernist thinkers argue that the concepts employed by subjects to make sense of their intuitions (i.e. for mundane subjects, perceptions, etc.) are not coined by one universal intellectual faculty common to all reasonable creatures (as in Kant), but rather they derive from different and thoroughly contingent historical conventions and practices.[3] Postmodernism considers concepts as depending upon "language games", that is, linguistic uses rooted in contingent social practices (Wittgenstein 1953, § 64, § 300), which cannot be justified in terms of accuracy or correctness (Foucault 1966, Ch. 7 *et passim*). Hence, what a certain subject is able to experience—also, but not only, at the level of perception—is considered to be contingent upon the concrete linguistic, social, and institutional

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networks that subject is in. Perceptions, and experiences in general, are considered as moulded by linguistic habits, theoretical assumptions, social institutions, in a nutshell, as culturally dependent (Goodman 1978).[4]

In a somewhat Post-Kantian sounding vein, the converse is also held to apply, that is, "concepts without intuitions are empty" (Kant 1781/1787, A51/B75). Only within the bounds of experience can any concept find a meaningful application. The concept of reality applying to something existing independently of human experience is therefore rejected as epistemologically illegitimate. Further, there is not even one single perspective-relative reality but rather a series of contingently accepted "realities". This entails that what counts as real for a subject with a certain cultural (institutional, conceptual, theoretical) background may not count as such for a subject with a different background: "there is no description-independent way the world is, no way it is under no description" (Rorty 1998, 87 cit. in Boghossian 2006, 27).

The idea that intuitions without concepts are blind, that is, that they cannot be experienced by a subject, also affects the postmodernist evaluation of perception that is not typically regarded as a genuine and independent source of information but rather as something whose content is under the sway of language, theory, and conceptual frameworks.[5]

There is an even more principled form of epistemological reservation against realism, namely correlationism itself, that is, the thesis that "objects exist only in correlation with their subjects" (Ferraris 2015a, 216), or, in a weaker form, that the only type of entities to which a subject can legitimately ascribe reality are experienced or represented objects and not independently existing entities. Correlationism has been an extremely influential perspective in modern and late-modern epistemology,[6] and its influence is still clearly recognisable in contemporary debates.

The upshot of postmodernist antirealist epistemological arguments is that no sense can be made of the idea of an independently existing reality but only of an experienced reality, and that, since reality can only be experienced through the contribution of conceptual frameworks, we are not faced with reality, in experience, but rather with possibly irreducible realit*ies*.

For the most radical or coherent forms of Postmodernism, what is legitimately considered as "real" within one framework may not feature at all in another one, and for equally good reasons, for example, if different concepts are applied or different criteria are accepted. That counts for any kind of putative "reality", from artworks to social media to the hard sciences (Feyerabend 1975; Latour 1987). As a result, Postmodernism acknowledges the "existence" of multiple "realities", even worlds (for a discussion, cf. Abel [1995, 447–511, 2004, 173–208]).

Correlationism and the "blind intuitions" thesis are applied by postmodernists to wholly social entities, like money, law, language, classes, and markets; they are also applied to notions like gender, race, nationality,

normality, anomaly, and further even to zoological, paleontological, biological, chemical, and micro-physical entities. According to the epistemological antirealist argument, not only are cultural and social realities perspective-relative but so too reality as such—all possible reality. The claim that all possible versions of what "reality" is like are, at bottom, contingent and arbitrary constructions is not to be taken to entail that such purported constructions hide or disguise the way the real world is in itself, for there is no such way, according to radical postmodernist positions.

2.2 Hermeneutical Reservations: Realism as Dishonesty

Against the background of Nietzsche's famous unpublished fragment, claiming that "facts are precisely what there are not, only interpretations" (cf. earlier discussion), realism is not merely accused of being an epistemologically (or semantically) untenable position: it is also questioned as to its honesty. The hermeneutic reservation may be reconstructed as follows:

i. "there are no facts, only interpretations";
ii. all claims (or "judgements") are not statements of fact: they are interpretations (from i.);
iii. claims are in the "space of reasons": they must be justified by those who make them (Cavell 1979; McDowell 1994, 3–23);
iv. claims cannot be justified in terms of their being true as regards purported facts (from i.);
v. claims may instead be justified by reference to assumptions, projects, and consequences (Rorty 1979, esp. 373–379; Vattimo 2012a, Eng. tr. 69–80);
vi. assumptions, projects, and consequences are questionable as to their ethical or political underpinnings;
vii. realism, that is, the thesis that there is an independently existing reality, by reference to which statements can be true, is not true (from i.);
viii. realism dissimulates the assumptions, projects, and consequences of human claims (from vii.);
ix. therefore, realism is not a fully honest position.

Assuming that all purported reality is in fact a correlate of contingent interpretations, rooted in specific milieus, postmodernist thinkers doubt the intellectual honesty of realism as an attempt to conceal the "reality" of all human claims (Rorty 1979, 375–378; Vattimo 2012a, Eng. tr. 69–80), that is, their being rooted in human-situated freedom and to pass off what (from their perspective) can never be anything but interpretations as dispassionate portrayals of a purportedly independent reality.

Further, according to postmodernists, not only are realists epistemologically inconsistent because they assert the existence of "things-in-themselves"; their conduct is also intellectually questionable because they attempt to conceal the status of their own claims and of claims in general. Realists behave as if they have something to hide or as if they did not want their motivations to be called into question, thereby subtracting themselves from the universal human responsibility to justify one's claims.

Postmodernist thinkers are happy to admit that their own claims are interpretations (Vattimo 2012a). Their claims do not mean to express an absolute truth; they can be revised, but also, and more notably, they, too, just like all possible claims, are correlated to contingent conceptual frameworks, institutional practices, intellectual programmes and are expressions of particular perspectives and interests that may be questioned as to their cultural agenda, political legitimacy, or moral appropriateness.

2.3 Political Reservations: Realism as Apologetics

Another common allegation against realism is that of having, at bottom, an apologetic attitude. An apologetic or ideological attitude is ascribed to realist thought on the same grounds as dishonesty. Since "facts are what there are not, only interpretations", realism is considered as an attempt to pass off received or dominant interpretations as statements of fact about an independently existing reality. Realism, from this perspective, is considered as the philosophy of the *status quo*. That allegation has been made also by non-postmodernist thinkers against all philosophy that upholds the relevance or primacy of being or data: "In all its embattled trends, which mutually exclude each other as false versions, ontology is apologetical" (Adorno 1966, Eng. tr. 61). Vattimo (2012a) talks about the "temptation of realism" as an urge to express the worldview of "the silent majority" (Eng. tr., p. 74).

This kind of postmodernist allegation could be expressed by a slightly adjusted version of Nietzsche's famous unpublished fragment, that is, "facts are what there are not, only dominant interpretations". The line of argument goes as follows: *ex hypothesi*, there is no such thing as an independently existing reality. However, in every society and historical period, there are dominant interpretations. Dominant interpretations are those enjoying widespread consensus. Their enjoying such a consensus, though, is not due to their accurately representing an independent reality, but rather to their matching the interests and perspectives of dominant groups, who more or less control institutionalised forms of knowledge production, value transmission, moral codes, and the like. Dominant interpretations have worked their way into public opinion and educational practices. They are still nothing more than interpretations and are still expressions of particular perspectives. However, their institutional and social status makes them so familiar to everyone that they end up

appearing as simple mirrors of the way things are, and exclude alternative interpretations from playing a significant role in intellectual debates, or even from being envisaged by community members.

For postmodernist thought, that sometimes revives not only Nietzschean but also Marxist strategies:[7] every time we believe that we are in touch with an independently existing reality, we are actually under the spell of some unquestioned dominant interpretation, we are in the grip of an ideology.

For Postmodernism, no interpretation (no claim)—not even a revolutionary or minority interpretation—can aspire to be considered as a pure and simple representation of the way things are. All that interpretations can do is to be justified or accepted, in virtue of their effectiveness in coping with given situations, or of their ability to express the cultural sensibility of a certain community or historical period.

Whenever a new, possibly innovative or revolutionary interpretation supplants an older one, becoming culturally dominant, it may tend to be presented as a representation of reality itself. Realism is the "temptation" of surrendering to accepted interpretations and of accepting them as neutral reports, thereby becoming intellectually gregarious or apologetic. Again, it is not claimed that criticism of the *status quo* would represent reality more accurately than dominant ideologies, but rather that reference to a purported independent reality constitutes as such an illegitimate attempt to defend some *status quo*.

2.4 Psychological Reservations: Realism as Weakness and Cowardice

Another common postmodernist (and Post-Nietzschean) allegation against realism is that it is a symptom of cultural and social *décadence*, if not of psychological weakness. Postmodernists contend that arguments in favour of realism fail to be theoretically or intellectually persuasive. However, their criticism does not focus exclusively on purported fallacies or theoretical deficiencies in realist arguments. It is also, if not mainly, a cultural or even psychological criticism, investigating realism as a symptom of a defective cultural milieu or psychological make-up.[8]

Realism is questioned by postmodernists as a culturally and psychologically defective attitude, as a sort of philosophical "neurosis" (Vattimo 2012a, Eng. tr. 28), consisting in the incapacity to accept life's inconstancy, unpredictability, impermanence. Because there is no reality, the emergence and success of a "fable" of the "true world", that is, of a whole philosophical tradition upholding the belief in the existence of reality, is a symptom of a psychological incapacity to adapt to an ever-changing experience, to the ambivalence of the human condition, to the inconclusiveness of every investigation.

Realism is regarded by Postmodernism as a consolatory or comforting philosophical attitude which has the pacifying effect of reassuring one

that, no matter how confusing, discomforting, or even tragically conflictual and aporetic human experience may become, there is an intact and perfectly determined way things are, behind the veil of appearances.

Realism is therefore considered as the manifestation of a disease, disturbance, or weakness. Conversely, Postmodernism considers the acceptance of interpretation's status of an inescapable element of experience, as a sign of philosophical character and of intellectual courage and vigour. In this, again, it has a clearly Nietzschean provenance, including some of its attitudes.

2.5 Ethical Reservations: Realism as Irresponsibility

Realism is accused by postmodernist thinkers of being an ethically suspicious position because of its putative refusal to acknowledge that every purported "reality" is actually the product of an interpretation, that is, of a proposal of which the proponent is in one way or another ethically responsible. Postmodernism upholds the importance of antirealism as a vindication of human freedom and rejects realism as an abdication of that freedom:

> The notion of "one right way of describing and explaining reality" supposedly contained in our "intuition" about the meaning of "true" is, for Sartre, just the notion of having a way of describing and explaining *imposed* upon us in that brute way in which stones impinge on our feet. . . . [T]hen we should no longer have the responsibility for choice among competing ideas and words, theories and vocabularies. This attempt to slough off responsibility is what Sartre describes as the attempt to turn oneself into a thing.
>
> (Rorty 1979, 373–374, emphasis in the original)

Realists maintain that there is a reality against which all claims are to be measured. Postmodernists deny that such an operation is possible at all, and add that all claims, theses, and theories, no matter how abstract or apparently far removed from daily concerns and interests, are always products of interpretations rooted in concrete historical and social contexts:

> [G]reat scientists invent descriptions of the world which are useful for purposes of predicting and controlling what happens, just as poets and political thinkers invent other descriptions of it for other purposes. But there is no sense in which *any* of these descriptions is an accurate representation of the way the world is in itself.
>
> (Rorty 1989, 4 emphasis in the original)

Every single claim is an interpretation: it is motivated, not by reality itself which does not "talk" (Cimatti 2018, 18-ff.) but by a network of prejudices, assumptions, interests, expectations, that is, it is to be justified

as an active proposal for which its proponent is accountable. Realism is, therefore, suspected of intellectual irresponsibility, of denying and rejecting the inescapable *engagement* of interpreters in what they claim, of inventing the role of a putative disinterested observer, who simply states pretended facts and impartially reports them, only in order to escape from the accountability of human beings with respect to the implications and consequences of what they claim.

2.6 More Political Reservations: Realism as Violence

One of the fiercest postmodernist allegations against realism is that to endorse the idea of an independently existing reality would entail one or both of the following claims:

- that facts hold good independently of whether they are acknowledged by anyone (Rorty 1990a);
- that, for any existing entity, there is only one correct description of that entity (Putnam 1990).

The conjunction of those two theses is considered by postmodernist thinkers as antidemocratic and potentially violent:

> The pretense of authority by those who possess, or believe they possess, or claim to have discovered the truth—a truth—is merely a violence to which we are accustomed in a certain way, within a certain cultural and political tradition.
>
> (Vattimo 2012a, Eng. tr. 169)

It appears antidemocratic because it seems to deny all significance to human dialogue, negotiation, and mediation with respect to the very existence of truth. If a fact's holding good is independent of any arguments, reasons, inferences, or demonstrations, and of the words in which they are couched, then democracy, with its complex and delicate network of argumentative practices, seems to be an obstacle to the genuine pursuit of truth. And the very idea that a (purported) truth can be imposed upon people who do not (want to) accept it seems to emerge as more acceptable.

The second statement adds an absolutist tone to the allegation: if there is a reality, then what makes statements true is that reality; but since mutually incompatible claims about one and the same reality cannot all be true, then there cannot be more than one true version of the way things are—hence the exclusion of pluralism, one of the fundamental values not only of postmodern society but also of contemporary democracy.

A position that holds, first, that facts need not be accepted as such in order to obtain and, secondly, that there is one true version of the way things are sounds like a *praefatio* to an authoritarian political philosophy.

It is no coincidence that some liberal democratic philosophers have insisted upon the centrality of dialogue, inclusion, argument, and open conversation, as constitutive aspects of human relation with truth or have privileged accounts of meaning that downplay the role of reference with respect to inference or dialogue (Habermas 1999; Brandom 1998, 2019: Part I, Ch. 2).

In what follows, we shall see whether such allegations are fair.

Notes

1. Burge (2010) argues that the interpretation of Kant's *dictum* as implying that all forms of experience involve conceptualisations may be in fact wrong: "Evidence from Kant's lectures indicates that he thought that animals, which he regarded as lacking concepts, have empirical intuitions (perceptions) of physical entities" (156). Kant would apply that principle only to "mature cognitive functions" (*ibid.*), such as the rational justification of knowledge.
2. That interpretation of Kant's *dictum* echoes another famous *dictum* by Gadamer: "Being that can be understood is language" (Gadamer 1960, Eng. tr. 474).
3. Concepts are often referred to as depending upon "language games", that is, linguistic uses rooted in contingent social practices which cannot be further justified. Cf. Wittgenstein (1953, § 64, § 300); Foucault (1966, Ch. 7, *et passim*).
4. The thesis that differences in language and praxis may bring about substantial differences in experience—or even in the world one inhabits—is defended also by philosophers who do not adhere to explicitly postmodernist positions. Cf. for instance, Abel (1995, 32–52; 1999, 40–68); Lenk (2001, 279–339).
5. Burge (2010) argues powerfully against that idea. Ferraris (2009, Ch. 2) criticises the thesis that perception is theoretically malleable.
6. Cf. Husserl (1913, §§ 44–45): "a transcendency which lacked the above described connection by harmonious motivational concatenations with my current sphere of actually present perceptions would be a completely groundless assumption; a transcendency which lacked such a concatenation essentially would be *nonsensical*" (Eng. tr. 100, emphasis in the original).
7. In fact, the argument borrows from Marx's critique of fetishism as well as from Nietzsche's project of a genealogical critique of socially accepted categories. Cf. Marx (1867, I, 4); Nietzsche (1887a).
8. Postmodernism echoes Fichte's (1797) early thesis that there could be no intrinsic theoretical reason to prefer the belief that things exist independently of subjective representations (which he calls "dogmatism") to the belief that the objective world is in some way produced by subjective activity ("idealism"), or vice versa. However, choosing idealism would be a sign of an intellectual attitude that he found commendable.

3 The Legacy and Consequences of Postmodernist Thought

3.1 Legacies

Besides its negation of the existence of a reality independent of any perspective, Postmodernism has catalysed or even fuelled the following transformations in contemporary culture:

- decline of (traditional and modern) claims to a monopoly of truth and knowledge, in particular by science and philosophy but also by various political orthodoxies (Lyotard 1979);
- appreciation of pluralism and diversity as positive values in themselves, instead of as a symptom of cultural fragmentation or confusion (Appiah 2014, 2018; UNESCO 2001, Arts. 1–3);
- acknowledgement of the relevance of non-dominant or minority perspectives (Vattimo 1983);
- investigation of the institutional and symbolic dynamics underpinning the elaboration and accreditation of both mainstream and niche discourses and worldviews (Foucault 1971b);
- exploration of the roles of old and new media in the production and accreditation of narratives, with particular reference to the relation between what counts as true or real in a certain society and what is endorsed by the majority or qualified minority of accredited media (Baudrillard 1991);
- critique of all forms of dogmatism, foundationalism, or static conception of truth and knowledge and preference for open, processual, participatory, dynamic, and dialogic conceptions of knowledge production, revision, and dissemination (Feyerabend 1975; Rorty 1976, 1990c);
- questioning of the conceptual and institutional frameworks underpinning dominant models of identity, gender, sexuality, race, nationality, health, and disability in favour of critical and inclusive approaches (Butler 1990; Hacking 1999; Ásta 2018a).

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Many have experienced Postmodernism as a form of liberation from dogmatic and ideological approaches, a sort of cultural counterpart to the fall of the Berlin wall and to the rise of the neo-liberal world. Others have welcomed it as a prelude to an age of dialogue and critical awareness. And indeed, Postmodernism has contributed to liberate many intellectual, cultural, and creative energies, to foster non-dogmatic interpretations of religion and spirituality, to accompany the conversion of economic systems from Fordism to Post-Fordism, and to vindicate the legitimacy of a post-ideological society. The conjunction of these attitudes and theses has had an enormous impact on culture, science (especially social science), art, politics, and society at large.

Over the past decades, Postmodernism has itself paradoxically become a sort of meta-narrative. Its influence has become so pervasive and widespread that even some of its most provocative philosophical claims—for example, there are no facts, only interpretations, no reality independent of human perspectives, or even that there is nothing outside of texts—instead of being considered (as they originally were) intellectual challenges to dogmatic attitudes have come to be treated as statements of fact, which can be used as premises in arguments.

3.2 Ontophobia

The postmodernist constellation is not a homogenous school or system. It is rather an intellectual habit shared by different philosophers, social scientists, activists, and artists, possibly disagreeing on a number of further themes. Being a cultural celebration of diversity and difference, Postmodernism enjoys a very broad and diverse spectrum of adherents or sympathisers.

If we look to the consequences of Postmodernism, we may reasonably expect suspicion regarding the notion of reality and a corresponding enthusiasm for anything questioning or diminishing the relevance of reference to it. Coherently with the theses and attitudes that we have just described, not only postmodernist philosophers, social scientists, media theorists, but also political activists, educators, and managers claim that what counts, both in theory and in practice, is not what reality is like (there is no "it is like", according to them), but rather how it is experienced, interpreted, talked about, categorised, related to, the role it plays in certain kinds of narratives, or the way it can appear in open interpretive or participatory processes: in summary, anything, except what it simply is. More interestingly, and conversely, we may expect that postmodernist approaches will assume that human perspectives (experiences, relations, discourses, narratives, political agendas, interpretations, and forms of sharing) contribute to determine what is considered to "be real"—instead of the other way around. In a postmodernist antirealist framework, being experienced as an *F* (as a piece of furniture, a woman, a tourist destination,

a disabled person, a smartphone, a brand), being talked about as an *F*, featuring as an *F* in a narrative, or in some shared process of meaning production and negotiation, tends to be all it takes for something to "be an '*F*'", or even all that being an *F* amounts to.[1]

In the postmodernist setting, the ontological work tends to be performed by perspectives. Perspectives contribute to produce or determine the most relevant features of anything that ever can be talked about, experienced, and understood, that is,—by the ontological standards of Postmodernism—of anything at all. Therefore, in order to know or understand what something is, why it is as it is, and what follows from its being the way it is, one looks not to (a chimerical) reality itself, but rather to the perspectives that make it what it is. That attitude—we wish to underline once more—is adopted also towards the status of physical, physiological, geological, chemical, biological, paleontological, and astrophysical phenomena—not only towards social and cultural ones.

As we have seen, given the plurality and radical contingency of possible perspectives, no one perspective can be preferred to others on independent grounds. Therefore, not only is there no determined way reality is but also no single or unique way it "is" (in brackets). That reinforces the inclination to believe that all there is to know or talk about, with respect to anything whatsoever, is what kind of interpretation, language game, experience pattern, or narrative determines its featuring with a particular value, in a particular context.

Postmodernist antirealism is not just a totally legitimate and fruitful interest in the contribution of perspectives to the different ways things are experienced and used. It is rather the refusal to look into whatever may lie beyond, beneath, or besides something's being experienced or interpreted in certain ways: "manifestation itself does not reveal a presence, it makes a sign" (Derrida 1967b, Eng. tr. 54); "The so-called 'thing itself ' is always already a representamen, escaping the simplicity of intuitive evidence" (*ibid*.). So why turn to things at all? "Anything that is a possible object of experience is ultimately an expression of our activity—where that is taken to include human concerns, interests, actions and beliefs" (Sacks 1997, 171 cit. in Habermas 1999). That attitude spreads to all branches of research and practice, including, of course, management and marketing. As a consequence, Postmodernism encourages the investigation of languages, experiences, contexts, interpretations, institutions, narratives, media, technologies; but, at the same time, it discourages a possible appreciation of whatever may lie beyond those frameworks and be their reference point: "From the moment there is sense there is nothing but signs. We think only in signs" (Derrida 1967b, Eng. tr. 54). And, as we shall see, that obfuscates the ability of postmodernist research and practice in various fields to appreciate crucial aspects of the phenomena to be investigated.

We have decided to label this postmodernist attitude 'ontophobia'. We find not only that this expression captures some of its most relevant

features, but also that it is common to cultural and intellectual circles that range even beyond the already broad spectrum of postmodernist positions:

i. 'onto-*phobia*' suggests that some kind of repulsion, suppression, or repression is taking place; something which its bearers may not even be fully aware of. Reference to reality makes eyebrows rise, suspicion of naivety or unsophistication is evoked. Reference to things or reality dissatisfies, generates intellectual discomfort, as if there were some kind of theoretical residue to be sublimated as interpretation at the earliest intellectual convenience. Conversely, models, theories, strategies, or proposals that claim to do without reference to a putative "reality" or to the way things purportedly "are" in themselves are saluted as intellectually challenging, refreshing, liberating. Postmodernism feels uncomfortable about things and reality and feels cheered every time reference to it can be dropped in favour of some further investigation of contexts, languages, interests, or narratives.
ii. '*onto*-phobia' hints at what the 'phobia' is about: 'ta onta', that is, things. 'On' in ancient Greek denotes things (or entities) in general. Postmodernism is not at ease with things and with direct reference to them. It is not at ease with the ordinary ("naïve") assumption that things exist at all; and it is even less at ease with the philosophical seriousness or even centrality of the notion of 'thingliness' in what it calls "Western Metaphysics".[2] It rejects the idea of things, of something being what it is, of a resistance against being dissolved into perspectives. It is somehow allergic to the semantic relation between reality, 'thingliness', and relevance,[3] both with respect to medieval and modern philosophy (and theology) and to the more modest idea that there is some work left for such concepts in contemporary philosophy and culture. Ancient Greek and medieval philosophy focused greatly on 'things' as ontological paradigms and on 'thingliness' as such as a philosophically central notion. Postmodernism escapes from every form of 'reification', 'objectification', 'hypostasis', in favour of discourses, practices, relations, experiences, narratives, identities.
iii. '*onto*-phobia' features what is the most interesting of the Greek expressions used to refer to things, for our purposes, that is, 'on'. In ancient Greek, 'on/onta' is used, alongside other expressions (such as 'pragma/ta' and 'chrema/ta'), also to refer to things in general. However, whereas 'prag-ma' evokes 'pract-ical' interests and prax-is in general, and 'chrema' the idea of things as useful assets or properties, 'on' is the present participle of the verb 'einai' (to be), and therefore evokes the status of things as 'beings' or 'entities' (Giannasi 2003, Ch. 1). 'Onto-phobia' specifically refers to Postmodernism refusing to appreciate that what we interpret and talk about, what

> we are practically involved with and are interested in, are things themselves, as determinations which feature in ordinary and institutionalised contexts as beings. Postmodernism is not simply an underestimation of the relevance of reference to reality: it is, for the aforementioned reasons, a systematic negation of the relevance or even of the intellectual, moral, and political appropriateness, of reference to things and to a purportedly existing reality in general.

3.3 Consequences of Ontophobia

Ontophobia has many relevant consequences or corollaries, only a few of which are intuitive. To begin with, it induces researchers and practitioners from different backgrounds and fields to underestimate or even neglect the possible importance of referring to reality in their respective fields of investigation. Secondly, and more dangerously, the three famous thought-provoking claims by Nietzsche (1887b: "Tatsachen gibt es nicht, nur Interpretationen"), Gadamer (1960: "Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache"), and Derrida (1967b: "il n'y a pas de hors-texte"), turn into intellectual slogans and are assumed to suggest not only that professional philosophers ought not to bother speculating about the reference of linguistic expressions to extra-linguistic entities, but also that researchers in all disciplines ought to refrain from referring to it. That is a delicate point, worth some supplementary reflection. It is one thing to claim that, from a philosophical point of view, the thesis of the existence of a reality independent of human perspectives is untenable. Another thing altogether is to maintain that, since there is no reality, reference to a purportedly independent reality plays little or no role in human thought and behaviour: that, in describing and modelling such phenomena one can and ought to dispense with any description of such a purported reference.

Our claim throughout this book will be not only that postmodernist arguments against the existence of reality have been shown to be at best inconclusive, but also, and especially, that reference to reality plays a paramount role in human thought and behaviour, and that social sciences would be greatly impoverished if they neglected its relevance. Not only is it philosophically acceptable to have a realist ontology, but reality is what human beings are after, in casual as well as in institutionalised practices. In the second part of this book, we shall be arguing that marketing cannot neglect the human desire to know how things really are, to discover the truth about them, to have access to accurate information, to have something which is genuinely and authentically what it is supposed to be.

3.4 Marketing and Postmodern Ontophobia

In our opinion, the merits and contributions of non-modernist marketing are beyond doubt. Our criticism aims at showing that even some of the

most advanced non-modernist approaches to marketing have fallen prey to some form of postmodernist ontophobia, and that their contribution is weakened by such attitude, even by their own standards, in some cases.

We anticipate that one of the turning points will be the reversal of the postmodernist antirealist strategy and in some way of some of its underlying assumptions and attitudes. The thesis that there is no reality will be challenged, but other—auxiliary—theses and approaches will also be questioned. For instance, we shall examine antirealism's tendency to peel off reality layer by layer, by assuming that all social and cultural reality is but a matter of conventions and perspectives and, once rid of the apparently easy problem of the reality of cultural phenomena, to concentrate antirealist arguments upon purportedly more difficult cases, such as biological, chemical, physical, geological, and astronomical phenomena, by bringing conventional or perspectival aspects of the respective sciences to bear upon the ontological status of such phenomena. The strategy of the present book will be, instead, the reciprocal one:

- pointing out the problems generated by postmodernist antirealist attitudes to marketing research;
- introducing and discussing some realist counterarguments to antirealist theses;
- insisting that reality is not some undercover irreducible objectual[4] residue hidden at the bottom of the social, cultural, and historical layers of convention and perspective, some unknowable *Ding an sich* at the limits of experience;[5]
- arguing that reality is rather pervasive, ranging from physical, chemical, biological, and psychological phenomena to cultural, social, institutional, and historical ones;
- discussing cases in which it is clear that reference to reality provides a vantage point to address issues in management in general and in marketing in particular.

3.5 A First Glance

Attempting to summarise all the main innovations introduced by marketing research and practice over the past decades would be beyond the scope of the current book. In what follows, we shall nevertheless make reference to some well-known tendencies, as well as to some of the most influential and original approaches and schools that we consider relevant examples of marketing theory influenced by antirealist Postmodernism.

There are a number of approaches that question certain ("modernist") assumptions that still operated in classical marketing theory, as it was conceived of in the 1960s and 1970s, assumptions that were symbiotic with—or even derived from—classical and neo-classical economic theory.

- *Romanticism Versus Rationalism*: the "modernist" conception of consumers as goal-oriented rational agents whose behaviour could be modelled in terms of a direct function from preferences, resources, information and computational capacity to consumption patterns has made way for more multifaceted descriptions that attempt to account for consumers' interest in symbolic aspects, traditional affiliations, political allegiances, personal feelings, cultural backgrounds, questions of personal or collective identity or even 'heroic' attitudes, as well as for episodes of sheer inconsistency or irrationality.
- *Particularism Versus Universalism*: the search for elegant and powerful descriptive, predictive, and directive models, to be applied to the most diverse contemporary contexts, has been replaced by the adoption of an open approach to the plurality of values and preferences, encouraging the attention of scholars and practitioners to various types of differences in consumer behaviour across different continents, countries, and social groups, as well as within them. Modelling and theoretical research have devoted growing attention and energies to the realisation of accurate portraits of specific communities and individuals, based upon their peculiar preferences and values, rather than relying upon abstract or general postulates or axioms concerning consumer behaviour in general.
- *Anarchy Versus Hierarchy*: traditional—and supposedly universally valid—hierarchical models of human preferences, needs, or values such as Maslow's pyramid and others, mainly inspired by nineteenth century utilitarian or empiricist psychology, have lost much of their appeal in favour of more and more emphatic appreciations of the variety of needs, desires, and preferences and their contingency upon cultures, historical moments, personal histories, or other psychological factors. That shift has resulted in the de-structuring of such modernist hierarchies and models.
- *Hedonism Versus Instrumentalism*: alongside the aforementioned shift from abstract substantive models of value and preference to more open and descriptive ones, there has been a clear shift from mainly utilitarian, or rather instrumentalist, conceptions of preference formation and consumer behaviour that pivoted on means-to-ends reasoning, to hedonistic and aesthetic ones, accounting for the relevance and importance of reflexive ("afferent") aspects of purchase and consumption, such as the search for rewarding experiences, for excitement and entertainment, for self-care, and for biographically meaningful memories. A clear emphasis on the aspects of subjective gratification, aesthetic appreciation, and hedonic consumption has gained the respect and attention of much innovative research in marketing, at least since the 1980s, at the expense of more traditional conceptions of consumer behaviour, mainly driven by functionalist (means-to-ends) evaluations.

- *Contextualism Against Atomism*: marketing has more and more emphasised the relational and contextual dimensions of value, progressively reducing its interest in intrinsic or monadic features and aspects of products. It has focused on products' potential for featuring as nodes in human relations and networks, for being included in social and personal narratives, for being adapted and customised to fit different contexts, rather than on their attractiveness for consumers due to features which they have in isolation from such contexts and relations.

All those shifts have uncovered and charted new territories for marketing research and brought important correlations and interdependencies to the attention of scholars and practitioners. Amongst the most relevant schools and tendencies, we would like to single out *Consumer Culture Theory* (CCT), *Experiential Marketing* (EM), *Relationship Marketing* (RM), and *Service Dominant Logic* (SDL). These approaches have enriched debates and practices over more than three decades, promoting, enhancing, or extending the aforementioned shifts. However, as we shall argue, allegiance to postmodernist antirealism or solidarity with some of its core attitudes has partially prevented them from achieving their full potential.

3.6 Experiential Marketing

The expression 'Experiential Marketing' (or 'EM') refers to a cluster of approaches and research programmes considered as alternative or innovative with respect to more traditional ones and unified by their vivid interest in subjective aspects of consumption (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982; Holbrook and Hirschman 1982; Schmitt 2009; Carù and Cova 2012). In its earliest formulations, EM did not explicitly part ways with more traditional marketing research but conceived of itself as more integrated with orthodox approaches.

3.6.1 Theoretical Innovations

The received view, against which EM was initially outlined and proposed, was described by Holbrook and Hirschman (1982) as having a number of features, which we could summarise as follows:

i. *behaviourism* (*positivism*): exclusive relevance granted to "directly observable buying behavior" (132);
ii. *(ascribed) rationalism*: a model of the consumer "as a logical thinker who solves problems to make purchasing decisions" (132), a focus on "rational choice", and on "the use of logical flow models of bounded rationality" (*ibid.*);

iii. *(ascribed) utilitarianism*: a model of consumer behaviour prioritising the role of "benefits . . . that perform utilitarian functions based on relatively objective features" (134);
iv. *reductionism*: reduction of the gamut of relevant attitudes and feelings of consumers, to a "tiny subset", "namely, like or dislike of a particular brand (attitude) or its rank relative to other brands (preference)" (136);
v. *objectualism*:[6] priority granted to "the tangible benefits of conventional goods and services" (134).

EM has suggested a strong revision and integration of the scope and method of marketing research, primarily by bringing to the attention of the marketing community a whole spectrum of subjective experiences correlated with purchasing patterns and consumption phenomena. As Schmitt and Rogers (2009, *Preface*) state: "The focus on customer experience has led a shift away from an analytical and largely cognitive view of branding that views customers as information-processors towards a more holistic view of customer value that encompasses rational and emotional benefits". Or, even more explicitly:

> [Y]ou have to somehow enrich people's lives and provide enjoyment for your customers. To define the purpose of marketing in terms of need satisfaction, problem solution, or benefit delivery is too narrow. The ultimate . . . goal of marketing is providing customers with . . . experiences.
> (Schmitt 2009, 113)

EM questions "the hegemony of the information processing perspective on the grounds that it may neglect important consumption phenomena", including "various playful leisure activities, sensory pleasures, daydreams, esthetic enjoyment, and emotional responses" (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, 132). It also begins to see consumption as such as "involving a steady flow of fantasies, feelings, and fun" (*ibid.*). The experiential perspective, pioneered by Holbrook and Hirschman in the 1980s, intends to integrate traditional marketing research by introducing a number of theoretical, methodological, and thematic innovations.

3.6.1.1 Behaviourism

From a strictly epistemological point of view, while confirming its allegiance to the scientific self-interpretation of traditional marketing, EM rejects the principle of the exclusive relevance of observed or observable behaviour. Such principle, often labelled as 'positivism', but perhaps more precisely defined as 'behaviourism', was extremely influential, especially in the English-speaking academic world, from psychology to economics, to linguistics and sociology, between 1920s and 1960s. Behaviourism

was in tune with perspectives that enjoyed broad philosophical consensus in the middle of the twentieth century, such as so-called Oxford philosophy, the late work of Wittgenstein, and American reformulations of post-"Vienna Circle" research programmes (cf. Carnap 1928; Ryle 1949; Wittgenstein 1953, 1956; Quine 1960); however, its appeal receded in the late 1960s and 1970s under the attach of neo-Cartesian arguments mainly stemming from philosophical linguistics and philosophical psychology (Chomsky 1966; Fodor 1975, 1983; Searle 1979, 1983). Behaviourism denies that a scientific theory of behaviour may rest upon anything other than publicly observable phenomena, and, in particular, it excludes reference to so-called first-person reports of experienced phenomena, as well as to unobservable ("inner") conscious or non-conscious mental states in general, considering them as epistemologically irrelevant. As behaviourist orthodoxy lost its grip, reference to mental states and processes, as well as to mental entities of many different kinds, regained respectability, in psychology, linguistics, the social sciences, and in philosophy.

EM promotes an integrated approach to consumption phenomena, and overtly rejects a restriction of the scope of marketing research to publicly observable phenomena, by dedicating "increased attention to the mental events surrounding the act of consumption" with a "willingness to deal with the purely subjective aspects of consciousness", and a readiness to "include introspective reports, rather than relying exclusively on overt behavioral measures" (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, 138).

3.6.1.2 (Ascribed) Rationalism

EM takes distance from the dominance of a purportedly "rationalistic" model of consumer behaviour, which interprets the consumption process primarily in terms of problem-solving. EM claims the existence of more fundamental and rich psychological processes and endorses an aspect of Freud's taxonomy of mental phenomena, according to which problem-solving abilities are but "secondary" psychological functions, resulting from an adaptation of more important, deeper, or "primary", processes, under the "secondary" pressure of "socialization" (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, 138; reference is to Freud 1899).

Since its early stages, EM has emphasised "primary" thinking, that is, thinking that takes place "in accord with the pleasure principle", and which "hearkens back to the way a baby pursues immediate pleasure or gratification" (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, 135). EM brings about, on one side, a far greater interest in the realm of emotion, fantasy, daydreaming, free mental association, imagination, and so forth, and, even more notably, on the other, a greater appreciation of the role of multisensory exploration of the world and exposure to it, with a particular focus on perception. EM thus promotes a shift from issues of problem-solving and of symbolic motivation to topics related to emotion, desire, excitement, immersion, and fantasy.

3.6.1.3 (Ascribed) Utilitarianism

As to the utilitarian upshot of more classical approaches, EM questions the monopoly of the interpretation of consumer behaviour in terms of a gathering of objects, whose features are considered by the consumer uniquely as instrumentally valuable for the achievement of certain goals.

3.6.1.4 Reductionism

The distinction between instrumental and aesthetic values dates back to the emergence of aesthetics itself as a domain (Kant 1790) and to the modern definition of aesthetic evaluations in terms of disinterested appreciation (Dickey 1974). Markets and the economic domain in general were traditionally associated with an instrumental rather than with an aesthetic dimension. In the experiential view, "the consequences of consumption appear in the fun that a consumer derives from a product—the enjoyment that it offers and the resulting feeling of pleasure that it evokes" (Holbrook and Hirschman 1982, 138). The experiential approach immediately marks a distance from traditional consumer studies by highlighting that there exists a perspective from which "the criteria for successful consumption are essentially esthetic in nature and hinge on an appreciation of the product for its own sake, apart from any utilitarian function that it may or may not perform" (*ibid.*). Moreover, the "seeking of emotional arousal" is credited with being "a major motivation for the consumption of certain product classes", and "emotional involvement" is considered to be "tied to the consumption of even simple products" (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982, 93).

Experiential consumer studies suggest instead a much more complex framework for the interpretation of the very aesthetic and emotional motives, which may animate and orient consumers (Carù and Cova 2007b) with a whole gamut of emotional responses: "an intriguing characteristic of esthetic products is that, while they may be consumed in anticipation of the pleasure they provide, the consumer may also choose to consume them even with foreknowledge that they will cause emotional pain" (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982, 96). Such behaviour is deemed as only apparently "irrational", that is, as irrational only "if one assumes that consumers pursue maximization of the 'sum-of-pleasures-minus-pains' according to Bentham's felicific calculus": "the hedonic perspective acknowledges that consumers can utilize painful knowledge" (*ibid.*).

3.6.1.5 Objectualism

Finally, as to the privilege granted by more traditional marketing strategies to objectual features, experiential approaches once more adopt a very different perspective by embracing opposed views and focusing upon radically alternative possibilities. Traditional marketing is considered by the experiential approach to focus primarily upon tangible features or aspects

of objects, that is, upon objectual, intrinsic, inherent traits: properties which they have, regardless of consumers' emotional responses to them. Such allegations, on the one hand, conflict with marketing's notorious obsession with consumers' perception, with perceived value, and so forth; on the other hand, they find confirmation in the classic features/benefits analysis or at least in the scarce attention paid by previous marketing research to the possible spectrum of responses, perceptions, feelings, sensations, and even fantasies associated with products by consumers: "The broader dimensions of emotion, such as strong feelings of anguish or rapture in response to products, are little explored or accounted for" (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982, 94). Experiential approaches intend to explore, instead, "the esthetic, intangible and subjective aspects of consumption" (92).[7]

Following influential proposals developed by Schmitt (2000), EM has insisted, amongst other things, upon five aspects or dimensions of human experience, that is, sensing, feeling, thinking, acting, and relating. The sensory aspects of experiences, the emotional ones, the more cognitively engaging or challenging conditions, the ones related to participation, activation, and involvement, as well as the relational, interpersonal, and intercultural aspects, all have been extensively studied and valued by EM,[8] thereby disclosing what could appear as a new domain of research and practice. Different dimensions of experience are coupled by EM with their respective "strategic experiential modules (SEMs)" and "experience providers (ExPros)" in order to describe correlations:

> As a marketer, you provide stimuli that result in customer experiences: you are an experience provider . . . . You provide the experience, and, as a result, your company and brand are seen as more or less likeable, admirable or attractive.
>
> (Schmitt 2009, 113)

The growth of experiential approaches has influenced the development of contemporary business from the booming of theme parks, shopping malls, and districts to the revision of tourism marketing and destination management to the creation of new types of locations and environments designed to enhance the intensity and richness of consumer experiences.

3.6.2 EM and Ontophobia

If we consider the relationship between EM and antirealism, we can easily find out that, since its earliest formulations, EM was at the very least strongly sympathetic with antirealist positions. For instance, in EM's earlier versions, we already find statements to the effect that consumption "is tied to imaginative constructions of reality", and that it is "based not on what consumers know to be real but rather on what they desire"

(Hirschman and Holbrook 1982, 94); we read that products ought to be "viewed not as objective entities but rather as subjective symbols" (93); hence, that researchers ought to consider "perceptions of the product as a subjective symbol rather than a concrete object" (94), and investigate "how the product is seen in the consumer's subjective reality, beyond its objective context" (*ibid.*).

Consumers are modelled by early versions of EM as uninterested in reality, or in the distinction between reality and illusion, imagination, or hallucination, or perhaps even as eager to escape from a reality in which they have lost all interest: indeed, early authors write about "self-constructed reality" and "altered state of reality [*sic*]", and characterise experiential absorption as "escape from reality by engaging in fantasy" (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982, 98), as if there were no difference, to consumers, between the value of induced experiences and the experiencing of reality itself: "product image, not strict reality, is a central focus" (93).

The relationship between EM and antirealism becomes stronger and closer, and particularly evident, if we consider EM's subsequent developments and its stalking horses: the concepts of experience and of authenticity. On the one hand, in fact, both notions intuitively evoke reference to reality: as the content and context of experience and as a touchstone of authenticity. On the other hand, though, EM's antirealism induces it to downplay such references, leading it down paradoxical pathways.

Philosophically speaking, EM begins with an allegiance to phenomenology (Holbrook and Hirschman (1982),[9] considered as a gateway to non-verbal dimensions of experience (Hirschman and Holbrook (1982). The notion of experience, which features in the expression 'Experiential Marketing', deserves some attention, as it has a controversial but rich philosophical background, of which proponents of EM are usually well aware. As will appear from what follows, EM typically highlights one or two poles of experience that have received extensive attention in the philosophical tradition, but it leaves a third and equally fundamental one completely in the background: it insists upon the unique and personal aspects of experience (something one can have only in person; something contingent and unpredictable), but it leaves behind a third aspect: experience as something by which one gets in touch with reality, with something else, thereby discovering something about oneself, too. Such a unilateral attitude, as we shall see, is related to ontophobia and antirealism and distorts EM's ability to make sense of experience.

3.6.3 Experiencing: A Philosophical Excursus

Our discussion intends to show how to integrate EM's concept of experience, but it also points out that such an integration can take place only outside the framework of postmodernist antirealism.

The notion of experience, as discussed in philosophy and psychology, evokes at least three distinct but intertwined poles:

- an experiencer: a being that has the experience, the one whose experience it is;[10]
- what is experienced: the being (thing, person, event, or other) that the experience is about. This aspect of experience (and of consciousness) is usually called "intentional directedness" (Brentano 1874) or "intentionality" (Husserl 1900–1, 1913), a term of art sometimes paraphrased as "aboutness" (Searle 1983). Experiences are not simply states of mind but quite typically involve reference to something (Schmitt 2011);
- the experiencing: the way in which the experiencer experiences what is experienced, the particular fashion in which the experiencer becomes aware of the experienced in the circumstances.

Experiences do not seem to take place in an ontological void. They occur to someone, and they are someone's experiences (Peacocke 2014; Bermudez 2016). Moreover, experiences affect the ones who have them, they alter them (Gadamer 1960, Eng. tr. 53): they may amuse, fulfil, enrich, but they also may sober, shock, disappoint the ones who have them, depending on their beliefs, motivations, and expectations, as well as on many other aspects and background conditions. This is one of the reasons why certain experiences are, or may be, sought after (or avoided) for their intrinsic qualities, by certain experiencers, and not necessarily as experiences of those particular things or situations, but, quite literally, as experiences of a certain kind.

Somewhat conversely, experiences are not just occurrences in a (subjective) stream of consciousness: yes, they are someone's experiences, but, typically, someone's experiences of something. Experiencing is experiencing something, something that is encountered (a person, a place) and possibly immersed into (a town, a festival, a movie, a study programme, an internship, a holiday, a theme park, a shopping mall, a concert, a campus, an exhibition). Experiencing is experiencing something and experiencing something is being exposed to it, making its acquaintance, stumbling upon it, being in it or with it. There is almost no limitation to the range of things that can be experienced in all sorts of ways: from small artefacts to landscapes, from concerts to conversations, to artworks and lectures.

Experiences are not the sum of experiencer and experienced, but they may involve a very broad set of modes. For every particular experience, there is a particular way in which the experiencer experiences what is experienced. What is experienced is not only encountered under a number of possible titles (the same person may be experienced as "my neighbour", as "my brother", or simply as "that man sitting over there"); the experience one has of it can take on a whole gamut of emotional tones

(happiness to see him, fear to meet him, doubt that he's really that person, curiosity, etc.). There is a big difference in the way in which I can experience a child playing ball, if I am a relative of that child, watching the child learn to play, or if I am a neighbour disturbed by that very same child, playing in my backyard while I am trying to take a nap.

There is at least one other sense or way in which experiences may be considered, that is, not only with respect to their structure but also by contrast to other forms of awareness of, or relation to, the world:

i. *presence*: in experience, things are there in flesh and blood (e.g. experiencing something as opposed to hearing, reading, or learning about it from others); they manifest themselves directly, without intermediation, filter, or medium (e.g. experiencing an event as opposed to reading a report about it), they appear as what they are (as opposed to imagining them, dreaming about them, or believing stories about them), they (finally) reveal themselves (as opposed to being presumed or expected to be in certain ways), they display themselves in full detail (as opposed to coming to be known through selective description or modelling), they are at one's disposal to be observed (as opposed to being perceptually unavailable or inaccessible), they are there *in concreto* (as opposed to being represented through possibly abstract features or by linguistic expressions), they are there alive (as opposed to being represented by a vicarious token, such as a description or an image);
ii. *first personhood*: experiences have evidence for those who have them (as opposed to speculations about the same things, or to reports); it feels like something to have them (as opposed to armchair reflections, or descriptions); they involve some intercourse with the things themselves or immersion into situations (as opposed to remaining detached or relying upon mediations); they tend to have sensuous and affective aspects or features (as opposed to a merely cognitive content) and therefore have an aesthetic potential (as opposed to a merely instrumental status); they tend to be remembered or even to be memorable (as opposed to indirect reports, which may be more easily forgotten); they can confirm or disconfirm assumptions, theories, or expectations (as opposed to reflections or conjectures, which might do so as well, but less typically); they can be shared by more experiencers;
iii. *biography*: experiences contribute to the shaping of an experiencer's personality and character (as opposed to things that come to be known in more mediated ways and without personal exposure); they may convey richer information due to direct sensuous contact (as opposed to representations); they are irreducibly personal (as opposed to formalised or traditional forms of knowledge); they have a contingent, unpredictable, and adventurous side (as opposed to

> controlled, piloted, or tutored forms of knowledge acquisition or socialisation); they may have an initiatory value, thereby contributing to determine the experiencer's identity and status within a certain community; they may be granted educational value, as episodes contributing to the ripening and flourishing of experiencers' characters; they may be ascribed biographic salience, as especially enriching moments in a person's life; they may be regarded as revealing, in terms of the self-knowledge that a person derives from the awareness or memory of her own reactions to facts or events she was directly exposed to.

Etymologically speaking, the notion of experience used in EM, derives from 'Erlebnis', a German word introduced in the nineteenth century, which became relatively widespread in the 1870s, especially due to the biographic writings of Dilthey (Gadamer 1960). Gadamer's (1960, Eng. tr. 55-ff.) analyses confirm that, also from a linguistic point of view, the German neologism 'Erlebnis' "suggests the immediacy with which something real is grasped—unlike something which one presumes to know . . . . What is experienced is always what one has experienced oneself [*Das Erlebte ist immer das Selbsterlebte*]" (Gadamer 1960, Eng. tr. 56).

However, Gadamer observes another, very important, nuance of the expression 'Erlebnis', a nuance which plays a central role in EM's notion of experience: the form 'what is experienced' (das Erlebte) is typically "used to mean the permanent content of what is experienced. This content is like a yield or result that achieves permanence, weight, and significance from out of the transience of experiencing" (Gadamer 1960, Eng. tr. 56). These two complementary aspects, of immediacy and enduring value, yield a "productive union: something becomes an 'experience' [*Erlebnis*] not only insofar as it is experienced, but insofar as its being experienced makes a special impression that gives it lasting importance" (Gadamer 1960, Eng. tr. 56). Indeed, Gilmore and Pine (2007, 23) note that "what consumers want today are experiences—memorable events that engage them in an inherently personal way". According to Gadamer's reading of Dilthey's texts, "the coinage Erlebnis has a condensing, intensifying meaning. . . . An experience is . . . distinguished from . . . the rest of life in which 'nothing' is experienced" (Gadamer 1960, Eng. tr. 60). Therefore, and that is particularly relevant to EM, "what can be called an experience constitutes itself in memory". By calling something an "experience", "we are referring to the lasting meaning" that it has "for the person who has it" (*ibid.*).[11]

The coinage of the expression 'Erlebnis', according to Gadamer, is also a linguistic reflex of a widespread cultural vindication of the centrality of life ('erleben' is related to 'leben': 'to live', cf. Schmitt [2009, 113]), as opposed to abstract rationality (associated with the Enlightenment) on

the one hand and to the conventions of society conceived of as contrived sophistication on the other:

> [T]he notion of experience also implies a contrast between life and mere concept . . . . Everything that is experienced is experienced by oneself, and part of its meaning is that it belongs to the unity of this self and thus contains an unmistakable and irreplaceable relation to the whole of this one life.
>
> (Gadamer 1960, Eng. tr. 61)

Indeed: "What we call an Erlebnis in this emphatic sense thus means something unforgettable and irreplaceable, something whose meaning cannot be exhausted by conceptual determination" (*ibid*.).

It is particularly relevant that the appearance of the expression 'Erlebnis' is related to the biographies of Rousseau and Goethe, whose writings contributed to the literary *genre* of "confession". And, indeed, the expression 'experience' emerges with reference to a period (the second half of the eighteenth century) marked by the questioning of the authority of traditional religious, cultural, and political models (Carù and Cova 2007b, 5-ff.).

Another element to this reconstruction of the biographic aspect of 'experience' is a reference to adventure, a reference added by Gadamer (1960) with respect to G. Simmel's use of the word, which accompanies its becoming fashionable in *fin-de-siècle* culture: "Every experience is taken out of the continuity of life and at the same time related to the whole of one's life" (Gadamer 1960, Eng. tr. 63). In the words of EM: "Experiences involve the entire living being" (Schmitt 2009, 114). Moreover, Gadamer (1960) credits Simmel with noting that "every experience has something of an adventure about it" (Eng. tr. 63), an intuition with important consequences for EM:

> An adventure . . . interrupts the customary course of events, but is positively and significantly related to the context which it interrupts . . . . It removes the conditions and obligations of everyday life. It ventures out into the uncertain. But at the same time it knows that, as an adventure, it is exceptional and thus remains related to the return of the everyday . . . . Thus the adventure is "undergone" like a test or trial from which one emerges enriched and more mature. There is an element of this, in fact, in every Erlebnis.
>
> (Gadamer 1960, Eng. tr. 63)

It is all the more remarkable that, more than twenty years before the publication of the seminal texts by Holbrook and Hirschman about experience and the aesthetic aspects of consumption, Gadamer acknowledged a tight-knit relationship between the notions of experience and of the

aesthetic: first of all, he placed the aforementioned discussion of 'Erlebnis' in the middle of a chapter dedicated to post-Kantian conceptions of aesthetics and art; secondly, he went so far as to claim that there exists an "affinity between the structure of Erlebnis as such and the mode of being of the aesthetic. Aesthetic experience is not just one kind of experience among others, but represents the essence of experience per se" (Gadamer 1960, Eng. tr. 63).

3.6.4 Experience Without Reality?

The notion of experience could be considered as a balanced synthesis between biographic aspects and referential ones. However, as Carù and Cova (2007b) have noticed, the "experience economy" and experiential approaches to marketing have not necessarily promoted an exposure of consumers to reality, but, paradoxically, they seem to have fuelled the growth of simulacra, surrogates, hyper-realities. This phenomenon may be related to the relevance of experience-staging for experiential marketing management, that is, of an approach directed to the improvement of consumer experiences through the design or staging of the contexts in which such experiences take place: "reality seems to have disappeared—all we have left are images, illusions, and simulations" (Carù and Cova 2007b, 7). Therefore, "We find copies to be truer than the reality they are supposed to represent.

We witness the paradox of an experience economy that produces the counter-intuitive effect of immersing consumers' lives into merely fake, simulated, contrived, and artificial environments. And, it should be noted, the relation between these two phenomena—the attempt to offer consumers a "real" experience while in fact producing a mere simulacrum—is closer to correlation than to mere coincidence. Experiences are acknowledged as economic entities in their own right along with more classic bearers of economic value, for example, commodities, products, and services (Pine and Gilmore 1999), and, as such, they are produced, customised, packaged, and delivered to customers. That leads to the production of contexts which reproduce some or even most of the features of ordinary experiences but distilled and deprived of aspects considered as negative or disturbing and whose positive aspects are enhanced (Carù and Cova 2007b).

Such environments are sometimes deemed "hyper-real", for example, enjoying certain properties associated with genuine contexts of experience but to an even greater extent and simultaneously dispensing with all the features which dilute the exciting or pleasant aspects of ordinary experiences. Consumers are, therefore, represented as immersed into experiences which are far more adventurous, exciting, self-defining, and memorable than the ones they would have before the advent of the experience economy. The doubts that arise from different sides are

whether immersion in such simulated, staged, or hyper-real consumption contexts

i. can be genuinely considered experience and;
ii. can be valued by consumers as such.[12]

The aspect of such contexts which is most usually criticised is their predictability and lack of freedom, that is, the exclusion of the possibility to contribute to the creation of one's own experience. That is certainly an interesting point, but it leaves another central aspect of the issue completely in the background, that is, whether immersion into a distilled, fabricated, staged context may legitimately count as experience, or whether, because of its very artificiality and lack of direct attrition with an uncontrolled context, it should be denied such a status.

The questions are principled and interrelated:

- Can something staged, contrived, simulated count as real?
- Can there be genuine experience without genuine exposure?
- Does it make a difference for the value that an episode has to a consumer, if the episode was a staged situation or whether it involved exposure to an untamed reality?

In order to answer the third question, we need to address the first two. In particular, the existence and massive production of simulations, simulacra, copies, fakes, and the like poses a new challenge to the very notion of reality: the real as opposed to the fictitious and the simulated.

Counting something as real and authentic is also a matter of opposition to what is supposed to be unreal or inauthentic. The second point is at least as crucial: if experience per se is valued and has become one of the most relevant value-bearers of our time (Gilmore and Pine 2007), and if counting as an experience does involve an element of exposure, direct encounter, attrition, surprise, discovery, and therefore also hazard, risk, unpredictability, how can staged situations be theatres of genuine experiences? How can something feel like an experience without being a genuine one? And, how can someone value something as an experience if it lacks these relevant components? As we have seen, the notion of experience (Erlebnis) has emerged from an increased interest in personal paths, in what is lived (erlebt) rather than simply learnt from a book or adopted from a code of behaviour. It should not strike us as odd, then, that one of the stalking horses of EM is the notion of authenticity, and that authenticity is mainly interpreted in terms of reality.

EM underlines the importance of subjective aspects of consumption. At the same time, though, its debarring reality from playing any significant role impoverishes its ability to account for what bestows value

upon certain experiences and not upon others. Such an unbalanced EM produces the unpleasant effect of promoting the immersion of consumer lives into merely fake, simulated, contrived environments; and experiences sparked by such environments tend to lose their value to consumers. No attrition with reality, no experiences worth having.

3.6.5 Experiencing Authenticity

In order to back up its concept of experience, EM resorts to the notion of authenticity. Authenticity seems to be the right kind of antidote to the antirealist excesses of EM: authentic experiences are, for EM, valuable to consumers and worth having, for them, as opposed to inauthentic ones. The question is what makes an experience authentic, or what distinguishes authentic and inauthentic experiences. The ideal of authenticity is considered by some philosophers (Ferrara 1989; Taylor 1992, 25–30; Williams 2002, 172–205) as one of the most viable ones in late-modern society. Authenticity has played an enormous role in twentieth-century culture (Trilling 1972, Golomb 1995), although it always was considered with suspicion by some thinkers (Adorno 1964).

The most common understanding of the current philosophical use of the expression is partly marked by twentieth-century Heideggerian neologism 'Eigentlichkeit', which was translated into English, French, and other languages as 'authenticity', but whose closest English approximation may be 'owned-ness' or 'being one's own'. 'Eigentlichkeit' expresses the possible existential decision to be one's own person, instead of just doing what "they do" and thinking what "they think" (Heidegger 1927, Eng. tr. 314-ff.; cf. McManus 2019). However, the English word 'authentic' has a literally different and independent meaning: "known to be real and genuine; based on facts, accurate" (OED 2012). 'Authenticity', therefore, evokes the idea of being one's own but also a sense of genuine reality. The double association of 'authenticity' with the genuine and real on the one hand, as well as with the personal and unique on the other hand is, therefore, etymologically and semantically attested, although not obvious.[13]

"Authenticity", we are told, is "what consumers really want" (Gilmore and Pine 2007), perhaps the most sought-after aspect of experience, in the so-called experience economy: "In any industry where experiences come to the fore, issues of authenticity follow closely behind" (1). In the light of EM's early sympathy with antirealism, we may be surprised to read that authenticity is in fact equated by EM researchers not with "being one's own" (Eigentlichkeit) but rather with its more literal sense: reality. "[C]onsumers choose to buy or not buy based on how real they perceive an offering to be. Business today, therefore, is all about being real. Original. Genuine. Sincere. *Authentic*" (Gilmore and Pine 2007, 1, emphasis in the original). Apparently, this last quotation refutes our allegation of ontophobia against EM, as well as our ascription of antirealism to it. Indeed:

> Raise the subject of authenticity today and many people talk about what is real and what is fake. . . . Underlying any difference of opinion about what constitutes authenticity is a shared belief that whatever is real is valued. On that we all agree.
>
> (Gilmore and Pine 2007, xi)

We are glad to subscribe to Gilmore and Pine's (2007) view on that. Unfortunately, their realism with respect to the notion of authenticity is only an illusion, because they give us reality with one hand and take it away with the other through a theoretical expedient they call "The Authenticity Paradox" (89). They delve into this paradox in a chapter dedicated to the "Prevalence of Postmodernism: The Socially Constructed Reality", which proclaims that contemporary philosophy has unequivocally shown that "reality isn't what it used to be" (89) and that "beliefs are not objective truths about an objective world but rather socially constructed realities".

To sum up: we are told that all consumers want is authenticity, and that authenticity is reality. However, we are also told that there is no such thing as reality. Since nothing is real, nothing is (*ex hypothesi*) authentic: authenticity is ontologically impossible. That authenticity is "ontologically impossible" does not simply mean that it is not easy to find: it cannot possibly exist. And that, in turn, is taken for granted, as (*nota bene*) "simply the logical conclusion that follows from centuries of philosophical thought on authenticity" (89). Hence, it is ontologically impossible to offer consumers what they really want: "*Nothing offered by any business is authentic; it's all artificial and utterly fake*" (88, emphasis in the original). The last statement could be taken as a conceptual hara-kiri. Gilmore and Pine take antirealism so much for granted that they do not attempt to envisage alternative scenarios, that would not lead into such blatant paradoxes, and claim, instead, that "businesses can render their inauthentic offerings as authentic" (89).

The question, then, becomes "how exactly does something really unreal come to be perceived as real?" (90). A good old answer would be: by mistake or deceit. Convincing someone that something unreal is real is very nearly a definition of deceit. Instead, EM's solution is to suggest that the experience of reality (and authenticity) is relative to the particular perspectives of consumers: "What one person experiences as completely authentic, another may view as completely inauthentic, and a third may be somewhere in between" (93). The "sole determinant of the authenticity of any economic offering is", therefore, "the individual perceiving the offering. Call it a corollary to the Authenticity Paradox" (92). Since authenticity is reality, but nothing can be real, something's being authentic is not a possible trait it can have but is relative to the way it is perceived or experienced by a certain person. We are back to the first sense of authenticity as being one's own. However, that looks like a *non sequitur* to us.

Rather, if a) authenticity is reality and b) nothing is real, then . . . well: c) whoever subjectively experiences anything as authentic is not "one's own", but is simply mistaken about it.

We find, here, a surprising contradiction and an attempt to disarm it by adding apparent qualifications: some offerings may be both inauthentic (fake) and authentic (real) but under different respects. While all offerings are "ontologically inauthentic", some of them are "phenomenologically" authentic, that is, experienced by someone as authentic. Unfortunately, such qualifications cannot do the trick, because, by definition, ontological authenticity *is* authenticity, not some special or qualified type thereof (ontology is about being). Conversely, phenomenological authenticity cannot be a different kind of authenticity from ontological authenticity, but it is either the manifestation ('phainomeno-logy') thereof or mere illusory, that is make-believe, authenticity. But since, *ex hypothesi*, ontologically speaking, there is no authenticity, then there cannot be any manifestation of authenticity, hence all pretended phenomenological authenticity is but illusory authenticity.

Saying that an offering which is ontologically inauthentic can nevertheless be phenomenologically authentic, that is, perceived as such "by the individuals who buy it" sounds like claiming that some ontologically unfaithful partners may be phenomenologically faithful, that is, believed to be so by those who trust them. EM's answer to its paradox is deeply confusing and revealing at the same time: it is confusing because of its circularity, but it is revealing because it indicates very clearly that ontophobia can blind even the most brilliant researchers.

We are not going to discuss the issue at length here, but we are interested in pointing out the following aspects of EM:

- EM correctly points out the relevance of experience;
- also, it correctly points out the relevance of reference to reality, but at the same time it acquiesces to the postmodernist antirealist thesis regarding the purported social construction of reality to such an extent that patent contradictions are not considered as serious theoretical problems;
- due to such tensions, EM is unable to consolidate its notion of experience and of authenticity.

In the absence of a robust reference to reality as an intuitive framework for both genuine experience and ascriptions of authenticity, consumers are modelled as formulating judgements of authenticity based exclusively upon their self-image; that is to say that the same thing would count as authentic to those whose self-image it reflects and inauthentic to those with different self-images.

EM makes reference to the philosophical notion of authenticity as ascribed to possible lifestyles: what is qualified as authentic is a life

governed by the principle of listening to one's inner inclinations and feelings, as opposed to the pressure of socially imposed standards and norms. Being authentic (as a person) is experiencing oneself as responsible for one's choices, being the author of one's actions, and not simply the actor in a play scripted by society: doing what one feels one should do, not what one is expected to do. If authenticity is to be a value, then, surely, what is an authentic life to one would be an inauthentic life to someone else, that is, to someone with a different character, different desires, different aspirations. Of course, that sense of authenticity has a strong relationship with that of experience, as we have seen, and is best contrasted with the inauthentic as the fake, in the sense of what is contrived, phony, disingenuous, staged. Authentic experience is personal but also a direct, un-filtered, non-mediated, untutored encounter with things themselves.

On the other hand, EM correctly points out that mass production, new media, and a series of technological revolutions have made genuine experience, that is, a direct encounter with reality, a more and more problematic theme. Contemporary society has become able to provide numerous surrogates of reality and to stage experiences. That leaves almost no room for authentic experience and authentic life and may give the impression of living an inauthentic life amongst fake situations and surrounded by fake things or even fake people. Hence, firms are confronted with the big task of providing offerings which can be experienced by consumers as part of their authentic life choices. The problem will never be providing the impossible, the authentic as—say—the non-artificial or the non-monetary; rather, it is in providing the conditions of an authentic life and experience.

If we understand the link between these two issues while realising that they do not coincide, we can avoid the paradox of vindicating authenticity while simultaneously claiming that it is ontologically impossible and trying to rescue it as "phenomenologically real", thereby suggesting that EM ought to become a massive imposture, caught between the alternative of "staging experiences" and "rendering authentic". If consumers "really want" authenticity, and authenticity is reality, shouldn't EM investigate alternative theoretical possibilities? If, instead, authenticity is radically divorced from the issue of reality, doesn't it inevitably fall prey to a loss of credit of personal life itself, in terms of a loss of the power of generating truly personal episodes and of thereby qualifying as genuine experience?

3.7 Consumer Culture Theory

Consumer Culture Theory—or 'CCT'—is credited with bringing a series of topics and issues to the attention of marketing management research, with particular reference to anthropological and phenomenological/existential aspects of consumption in late capitalist societies. In particular, CCT investigates the role of markets and consumption in the definition of personal identities, in the creation of communities and rituals, and in a

number of other crucial anthropological contexts (Arnould and Thompson 2005).

3.7.1 Liaisons Dangereuses

CCT has been an influential trend in the last thirty years of marketing research, featuring in most handbooks of marketing as well as in surveys of the most significant non-modernist, or non-classical, approaches to consumer studies (Tadajewski, O'Shaughnessy, and Hyman 2013, Vol. 3). Whenever we read or hear about identity, tradition, ritual, personality, niche, subculture, mainstream or minority narrative, membership, we are somewhere near the conceptual *milieu* of CCT.

In what follows, we shall mostly draw upon CCT's retrospective manifesto (Arnould and Thompson 2005), which summarises twenty years of CCT research and can be taken as a paradigmatic reference point for a discussion of CCT's main features. As we shall see, in the case of CCT, two related paradoxes emerge:

- CCT snubs the notion of reality but seems unable to dispense with it in its descriptions of consumer behaviour, thereby falling prey to conceptual inconsistencies that have important repercussions upon its representation of consumers;
- CCT criticises monolithic or oversimplified representations of culture(s), but it models consumers as postmodernist antirealists, thereby succumbing to a form of overgeneralisation and indirect ethnocentrism.

CCT shuns philosophical or methodological orthodoxies, but some of its most authoritative exponents use concepts which resonate with existential phenomenology and with hermeneutics (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989), which are also reference points for the postmodernist movement (Vattimo and Rovatti 1983; Rorty 1991c). The solidarity of CCT with Postmodernism can be noted from its self-proclaimed resistance to "grand" or "overarching" epistemological models and its inclination to present itself as an interpretive approach (Sherry 1991; Arnould and Thompson 2007). Its attention to diversity, fluid identities, alternative narratives, minorities, and niches also draws upon fecund postmodernist intuitions. The same may be said of the condemnation of excessively monolithic representations of cultures and communities.

In CCT's manifesto, reference to reality is evoked to model a crucial theoretical node: the link between consumer experiences, fantasies, and self-narratives on the one hand, and what they are about on the other. Consumer experiences are explicitly described as being about—or, more emphatically, "constructed around"—different kinds of "realities". Reality, or rather "realities", are, correlatively, introduced as the reference

points or pivots of consumer experiences and (self-)narratives. It is also claimed that consumers "use consumption to experience realities". Hence, it is maintained that realities are what all consumer experiences pivot upon. Realities are what it's all about, for consumers—or so it seems. That, as in the case of EM, seems to exclude any ontophobia. However, as we shall see later, such a crucial theoretical reference to reality is inhibited and distorted and contains the following paradoxical twist:

- consumer experiences revolve around realities;
- (there are, in fact, no realities);
- consumers are not interested in the realities they experience.

The notion of reality is explicitly introduced in a crucial passage of the CCT manifesto, which describes consumers' complex or even idiosyncratic attitudes towards what features in their experiences:

> Consumer culture theory research also highlights that the proverbial real world, for any given consumer, is neither unified, monolithic, nor transparently rational. . . . Consumer culture theory research shows that many consumers' lives are constructed around multiple realities and that they use consumption to experience realities (linked to fantasies, invocative desires, aesthetics, and identity play) that differ dramatically from the quotidian.
>
> (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 875–876)

What quotations reveal is that all experiences, for CCT, revolve around reality; that they do so at social, interpersonal, and even at intra-personal levels; that humans somehow end up referring to some form of reality not only in quotidian contexts but also in fantasies, desires, aesthetic experiences, or when playing with their own identities and with those of others.

3.7.2 Proverbially Real

The first quotation summarises an attitude contained in the whole manifesto and features many different elements, all betraying antirealist commitments. To begin with, the very notion of the real world is mocked as 'proverbial', displaying a typically postmodernist condescendence with respect to realism and the very idea of there being a real world: in fact, the expression 'proverbial real world' calls to mind Postmodernism's second favourite Nietzsche-quote (Nietzsche 1889): "*How the 'True World' Finally Became a Fable—The History of an Error*", and suggests that reference to reality is not a seriously admissible theoretical gesture any more[14] but rather a sluggardly reliance upon inherited commonplaces, cultural relics from an unsophisticated past (indeed, from the apparently commonsensical, down-to-earth world of proverbs). The idea of

something's simply existing or being in a certain way is evoked solely to be ruled out immediately as a viable theoretical option. 'Proverbial' carries a clearly patronising sense: it suggests that the right place for the idea that there is a real world is in trivia, not in academic debates.

CCT's use of 'realities' resembles some typical stratagems of modern construction technique: buildings need to be equipped with all sorts of pipes, wires, cables, and devices in order to function at all, but these devices are camouflaged or hidden behind false ceilings or under false floors, because they are hard to reconcile with the aesthetic expectations of their clients, who typically do not wish to see what buildings are made up of. We are suggesting that, in fact, CCT and EM should simply accept the inevitability of reference to reality, rather than trying to camouflage or conceal it with all sorts of theoretical tricks.

If we consider further aspects of the same quotations, we can extrapolate other signs of CCT's commitment to antirealism that clash with its use of the notion of reality and suggest that the manifesto is attempting to distort the notion of reality enough to make it unrecognisable, while keeping it in the framework because of its inevitable structural role. Such aspects of CCT are:

- nihilism: nothing is real *tout court* (except perhaps in proverbs);
- relativity: a "real world" can exist only "for" someone, that is, relative to a perspective;
- idiosyncrasy: there is a different "real world, for any given consumer";
- fragmentariness: whatever is real, even for one and the same consumer at one and the same time, is "neither unified, monolithic, nor transparently rational".

What we witness is an attempt to deface the notion of reality. The very traditional conceptual opposites of reality are substituted for it: inexistence, relativity, idiosyncrasy, fragmentariness: *lucus a non lucendo*.

Just like with EM's authenticity paradox, we witness a case of theoretical prestidigitation: a notion (reality) is introduced with one hand and taken back with the other. Indeed, the passage even seems to suggest that the notion of reality was introduced *en passant*, as though it would have been possible, perhaps even easier, to use other, more appropriate notions instead: as though CCT or contemporary philosophy could have easily come up with a theoretical alternative for such an obsolete notion. That is not obvious at all, though. And, in particular, it is a very suspicious assumption to make, in a text that wrestles with a notion it has introduced in the first place.

Again, as with EM's analysis of authenticity, it appears to us as though the introduction of reference to reality did not take place by accident, but rather against all odds, and out of some kind of necessity: it is all the more

revealing to find a notion in a theoretical framework that is so recalcitrant towards it. Why introduce the concept of reality if it is considered an *Unding*? Why make such an embarrassing gesture if there are theoretical alternatives?

3.7.3 Bumps in the Carpet

The point is not simply about the degree of arbitrariness that can be tolerated with respect to the concept of reality, but rather about the tension between the pivotal role of reality in any model of human thought and behaviour (including, of course, consumer experience) and the attempt to neutralise it because of ontophobia. We insist that, no matter how vituperated and disfigured, it is the very concept of reality that is being resorted to in the CCT manifesto. CCT seems, therefore, unable to substitute reference to reality with an alternative notion or function and, rather, admits that: "Consumer culture theory research shows that many consumers' lives are constructed around multiple realities and that they use consumption to experience realities", although such realities are supposed to be "linked to fantasies, invocative desires, aesthetics, and identity play" and to "differ dramatically from the quotidian" (*loc. cit.*). Also, in that last passage, we have the sense that CCT is reluctant to use the notion of reality in a straightforward way and wishes instead to counterbalance and qualify it. Once the notion of reality is in the framework, however, it is not easy to control or to harmonise with an antirealist agenda.

The notion of reality is not so easy to bend. For instance, even if we abstain from technicalities and remain on the level of intuitive reasoning, we can point out that the aforementioned move of reducing "being real" to "being real for someone" is problematic for at least two reasons.

Firstly, for anyone familiar with the form and purpose of theoretical definitions, it is obvious that equating 'real' with 'real for someone' cannot work, because 'real' occurs in the *definiens*: the reduction re-proposes the notion that it is devised to substitute. 'Real' is still right there, on the right side of the definition.

Secondly, the distinction between being real for someone (being recognised as real, being known to be real, being believed to be real, etc.) and being real *tout court* is embedded in a number of pretty basic and constitutive human experiences and cognitive patterns that cannot easily be made sense of without it: for instance, the experience of becoming acquainted with something previously unknown to one, the process of coming to know about something, of changing one's beliefs about something, of finding out that one was wrong about something, of revising one's beliefs about something in the light of better information, testimony, proof, etc.; we humans appear to be constitutively familiar with the difference between something's merely being real for us (i.e. our considering it as real) and its possibly being in fact real (whether or not we know

about it, at some point); no cultural (or technological) transformation has discarded the fundamental familiarity with the distinction between being real and simply being considered to be real (or not being known to be real or being real but mistakenly considered not to be).

Thirdly, and in summary, it is the idea of something's being real *tout court* that clarifies the notion of its possibly being real for someone, not the other way around. And that is precisely what emerges from CCT's inevitable use of that concept even while trying to express its contrary.

There is a second inconsistency deriving from CCT's antirealism. According to CCT, as we have seen, every consumer juggles a plurality of realities which are not unified even at the intra-subjective level, let alone inter-subjectively. The question is, why are consumers not supposed to question their ontological whims? Why are they supposed to be satisfied with idiosyncratic or even haphazardly personal ontologies? Why are they portrayed as constructing their experiences around totally fragmentary realities? Why are consumers portrayed as being so very different from most ordinary folk, indeed from the man-in-the-street mocked by CCT as being committed to the "proverbial" existence of a real world?

On the one hand, perhaps no other marketing approach has been so meticulous as CCT in investigating the co-variation of consumer habits with the diversity of cultures, subcultures, and countercultures with cultural niches and other non-mainstream groups. On the other hand, though, CCT seems to commit a paradoxical violation of its own standards by implicitly modelling all consumers as subscribers to its own antirealism. It thereby makes two odd moves: it ascribes its own assumptions (antirealism) to consumers themselves, and it does so to all consumers and not simply to those belonging to a specific subset. CCT commits what could be described as a fallacy of ascription: it ascribes its own antirealism and nonchalance with respect to the role of reality to consumers themselves. We call 'fallacy of ascription' a mistake made by some social scientists: ascribing their own theoretical assumptions to the populations they are modelling.[15] CCT not only (inconsistently) adheres to antirealism but also models consumers themselves as antirealists. That appears to be the case with CCT's model of consumers' relation to reality.

3.7.4 Postmodernism for All?

CCT is not only a postmodernist antirealist approach, but it models consumers as being themselves postmodernist individuals, that is, as being almost exclusively interested in constructing their identities by using available cultural tools, without bothering too much about the correctness and accuracy of such tools. All consumers seem to care about, in CCT's retrospective manifesto, is to "rework and transform symbolic meanings encoded in advertisements, brands, retail settings, or material goods to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals" (Arnould and Thompson 2005, 871).

Consumers are, therefore and in addition, portrayed as having a non-committal attitude towards reality (although their experiences are described as revolving around "realities"). They appear as post-Nietzschean players who do not take the meanings they ascribe to their experiences too seriously and have learnt not to mistake them for independently existing realities. That, again, appears to us as very counter-intuitive: are all consumers really so antirealist? Are they all so uninterested in the reality of what they experience? Are they all exclusively concerned with the usefulness of cultural resources for a process of self-definition, self-narration, and self-identification?

Modelling consumers as postmodernist actors restricts the scope of CCT's theories to groups of postmodernist consumers, or, worse, casts a paradoxical shadow of ethnocentrism upon CCT itself. On the one hand, ascribing ontological agnosticism or scepticism to consumers as such superimposes a postmodernist framework on their own belief systems, thereby possibly clashing with their own worldviews: there are, in fact, plenty of ironic, postmodernist, sceptical, relativist, or perhaps even ontologically agnostic consumers who do not take the issues of reality and truth too seriously (perhaps they ought to); but there are, there always have been, and especially there always will be plenty of consumers who are not antirealist and who believe that the reality (or "realities") they experience define who they are because they are, in their opinion, realities and not mere illusions, constructions, or hallucinations. Most consumers, like most humans generally, are prepared to admit they might be wrong about many things, but very few would embrace the idea that it does not matter whether what they believe in is real or not, or whether their beliefs are consistent with each other: many, if not most consumers would not be ready to declare that what they take to be real is in fact simply real-for-them, that they believe what they do simply because it helps them build their identities, or that what they take to be real is but a correlate of non-unitary and non-rationally transparent experiences.

The alternative to an empirically false general ascription of antirealism to all consumers is a restriction of CCT's model of consumers to those very groups who share its antirealist postmodernist views: a postmodernist model of consumers who are postmodernist. *Nota bene*: not all consumers in contemporary societies, because contemporary societies are still largely populated by individuals and communities with robust (sometimes even dogmatic) ontological views. The choice would, then, be between empirical falsity (not all consumers are ontologically sceptical) and loss of empirical generality (producing a model of only consumers who have a postmodernist worldview). Ascribed antirealism jeopardises CCT's project because it restricts its scope geographically, generationally, and socially.

CCT's interesting reference to the relation between consumption and identity ought not to be dismissed or reduced: it ought rather to

be integrated with the awareness that reality and reference to it play a crucial role in the definition of individual and collective identities. Indeed, no complete analysis of the relation between consumption and anthropological themes (such as identity, membership, status) can be carried out without involving the relevance of reference to reality in it.

3.8 Relationship Marketing

The third trend in marketing which we intend to discuss is Relationship Marketing—or 'RM' (Gummesson 1999).

RM has provided fruitful theoretical contributions to a richer understanding of market relations; it has insisted upon the centrality of interactions and relations in human reality generally and, more specifically, in value generation. It has cast a fresh light upon the notions of loyalty, satisfaction, and consumer retention and has paved the way to a whole new branch of research and practice.

RM is much less openly committed to postmodernist theses than EM and CCT: in its fundamental texts, we do not find an open allegiance to popular postmodernist claims about the status of truth, knowledge, or reality. However, the upshot of its most crucial theses is, as we shall see, deeply ontophobic, and the consequences of that ontophobia are clearly negative. RM's plea for the acknowledgement of the role of relations has cast a fresh light upon important management and marketing phenomena.

Wherever the option is envisaged, RM suggests the substitution of intangible dispositions or dynamics (relations, competences, skills) for objects proper. The theoretical stance of RM is one-sided, because it tends to highlight relations as opposed to objects. RM tends to be "Pentecostal", in Ferraris's (2018) sense.[16] In the philosophy of meaning and of social institutions, 'Pentecostalism' is the theoretical attitude of modelling meaning and value as something bestowed by spiritual agents upon mundane entities, as though meaning and value "descended upon" them, and as though non-human entities (especially things, objects, their relations) were constitutively unable to generate meaning and value or to contribute to their emergence and stabilisation. In a "Pentecostal" scenario, mundane entities, their properties and relations are radically extrinsic and irrelevant to the meaning and value they have in a certain context; conversely, meaning and value can be bestowed upon basically anything, because they pre-exist their bestowal upon things (typically, in the minds of subjects), and "nulla 're' indigent ad existendum".[17]

Instead of appreciating the contribution of things and objects to the emergence, stabilisation, and dissemination of relations, conventions, and cultural patterns, such as human habits, uses, meanings, and institutions, RM seems to be held hostage by the (modernist and) postmodernist assumption that all existing meaning and value originate in human

attitudes (including beliefs and intentions) and are therefore bestowed by humans upon objects, which are, in and of themselves, inert recipients of such meaning and value.

RM's position is at odds with the fact that habits, institutions, and behaviours tend to co-evolve with objects, to emerge around them as their reference points, and such objects embody and sustain the very existence of those relations and institutions. As Serres (1980 Eng. tr. 224-ff.) and later Latour (1991) have pointed out, introducing the notion of "quasi-object", it does not simply take a group of people who want to play in a certain way, for them to be a basketball team or for the game of basketball to exist: rather, it takes a number of existing rules, embodied in objects, such as standard-sized basketballs, baskets, fields and facilities, equipment, outfits, in order for basketball to exist as a game and for a group of persons to even intend to play basketball.

For instance, it is true that smartphones receive their concrete roles and functions from the social patterns existing in contemporary societies, and that those social patterns explain their design, size, weight, texture, etc. But the converse is at least as true: it is only because of the existence and massive circulation of smartphones with certain features that certain habits and patterns emerge, spread, and become stable. It is inconceivable to imagine the spreading of online teaching during COVID-19 without making reference to the existence and features of all sorts of digital devices. Similarly, a group of consumers may make a creative use of a product and thereby contribute to the emergence of new value and new meaning, but such a bestowal of meaning and value creation has, as its pivot, an existing object or a set of objects which can support it and make it persistent over time.

Reversing the *ontophobic* insistence upon the claimed priority of relations and attitudes with respect to objects and their features, one could suggest that relationships and attitudes co-emerge with objects and are not simply bestowed upon them. Again, as with EM and CCT, RM's ontophobia does not disqualify its theoretical undertaking as misguided, but it calls for integration: only a perspective that takes into account the relevance of things for the emergence of new relationships, and the sustaining of old ones, is capable of unfolding a satisfactory analysis of relations and deploying an adequate conceptual grid to understand them. As with EM and CCT, what we propose is a reversal of the ontophobic attitude: instead of peeling off the layers of meaning and value from objects and ascribing all meaningfulness to mental states and attitudes towards them, until we are left with purportedly insignificant bare things, we suggest looking at the concrete way in which new and often unpredictable meaning and value emerge around objects (Ferraris 2016, 2018) and prompt new attitudes and habits, as much as the other way around.

3.9 Service Dominant Logic

The last trend in marketing management research that we intend to discuss is Service Dominant Logic—or 'SDL' (Vargo and Lusch 2004, 2008; Lusch and Vargo 2006). SDL is a radical rethinking of marketing categories that has cast fresh light upon the phenomena of value generation and service provision. SDL has proposed a challenging reformulation of the notion of value, of the forms and dynamics of value production and dissemination, and of the idea of consumption, indicating a place for consumers in the very co-creation of value in general and of market value in particular.

Like RM, with which it shares some traits, SDL is not openly committed to postmodernist theses: in its texts, we rarely find an open allegiance to popular postmodernist claims about the status of truth, knowledge, or reality. However, the upshot of its most crucial theses is radically antirealist. Moreover, SDL has a similar (if not greater) degree of ontophobia than CCT, EM, and RM, that is a clear intolerance to "objectual" or "thingly" entities (goods, products) and to whatever cannot be reduced to the processual or the intangible.

From an ontological perspective, SDL's antirealism reveals itself in two correlated reductionist theses (Vargo and Lusch 2004):

- goods are nothing but service distribution devices;
- strictly speaking, there are no resources.

We shall attempt to show that those theses are both theoretically untenable and counterproductive. RM's plea for the acknowledgement of the role of relations as well as SDL's campaign for the recognition of the centrality of service provision and value co-creation have cast fresh light upon important management and marketing phenomena. For instance, researchers and practitioners are invited to reflect that purchasing a hammer (thingly good) may be viewed as acquiring not simply the object, but rather the possibility of hammering (dynamic service) whenever one wants. A second step towards the Service Dominant Logic of marketing is the remark that hammering is not a service that can be fully embodied in the hammer: that potential must be actualised by hammering skills which must be held or developed by the buyer; they cannot be supplied by the factory. Product buyers are, therefore, not really consumers, but rather co-producers of the hammering service they are purchasing through the hammer (Vargo and Lusch 2004). A similar line of argument is developed by SDL with respect to all apparently thingly products: razors, pans, books—basically everything else. Hence, the difference between goods and services is portrayed by SDL more in terms of degree (between types of services) than kind (between services and goods).

SDL's interpretation is very stimulating and casts an interesting light upon thingliness itself, as a potential source of services. However, it is

formulated in terms of an unnecessary crusade against objects and anything objectual, or thingly. Indeed, SDL typically presents its vindication of the centrality of services in deeply dichotomous if not Manichaean terms: as an either/or ultimatum between precious intangible processes and purportedly residual or inert tangible objects.

SDL reduces goods to services, which are described as mere "physical embodiments of one or more competencies"; "tangible products", in general, are referred to merely as "embodied knowledge or activities" (Vargo and Lusch 2004). The differences between tangible and intangible, processes and objects, goods and services are not introduced by SDL in terms of fruitful complementation but rather as theoretical choices between incompatible alternatives, one of which (the objectual option) is presented in clearly ontophobic terms: objects are empty, inert, and sterile. Objects are relics of archaic systems of value creation (and theorising) and must make way for processes (Vargo and Lusch 2004).

SDL portrays objects (goods, products, etc.) as barely relevant vehicles of intangible competencies and dynamics. The framework it proposes represents intangible skills and competencies as created and encapsulated in objects at the moment of their design, and as subsequently extracted, or rather skilfully reactivated—or even better co-created—by their final users at the moment of use. Objects are mere "distribution mechanisms for service provision" (Vargo and Lusch 2004, 14). The very process of product purchase is, consequently, presented as a way of acquiring the skills and competencies "encapsulated" in them. Products are viewed as capsules, as if they were containers or shells, whose relation to the type of services they can provide appears as quite arbitrary or conventional: the thingly or objectual features of goods are not discussed as contributing to their value or even to the type of services they provide.

In SDL, services appear as the only relevant aspects, as intrinsically intangible, and as alternative to goods: intangible entities cannot inhabit thingly ones. They can only be "encapsulated", wrapped up, in them, like Platonic souls buried in their bodily sarcophaguses. Goods are considered as skill and competency storage devices, whose main function is to enable the transport and provision of services at distance, or at leisure: an electric razor enables a consumer to shave whenever and wherever they want (provided that they possess the ability to shave). Goods are reduced to devices through which demand and supply exchange or contribute to activate services.

The refreshing idea that consumers really ought to be viewed as value co-creators is unnecessarily presented as a sort of corollary to the ontophobic assumption that objects and objectual features (the sharp blade of the razor, the ergonomic handle of the hammer) cannot play any significant role.[18]

SDL uses a very similar approach to conceptualise the ontological status of resources that are described as "intangible and dynamic functions of

human ingenuity and appraisal" (Vargo and Lusch 2004, 7), rather than as pre-existing materials with specific potentials. According to SDL, in a fundamental sense all resources are intangible because all resources rest upon some form of ingenuity (knowledge, skill) in order to actualise their potential output. Lusch and Vargo formulate radical ontological claims about value, resources, and being: "resources are not; they become" (Vargo and Lusch 2004).

From an ontological perspective, the last statement is as radical as anything could be. To articulate that claim, SDL introduces an interesting distinction between "operand resources", that is, resources that produce effects only when operated upon, and "operant resources", that is, resources employed to actualise the potential of operand resources (Vargo and Lusch 2004, *passim*). The distinction is intended to illustrate that ordinary stuff (operand resources) only becomes a resource thanks to competencies, skills, or knowledge (operant resources) that operate upon it in certain ways: without operant resources there would not be any operand resources either, that is, no resources at all. Hence, processes, competencies, skills, knowledge are not described as the *ratio cognoscendi* but also as the *ratio essendi* of all resources. Vargo and Lusch (2004, 8) explicitly claim that the turning point for economic theory was the moment in which skills and knowledge began to be considered as the most important types of resources.

If we consider SDL's ontology, we find that its claim that there is no such thing as a resource ("resources are not") rests upon an even deeper (and deeply ontophobic) assumption: that nothing "static" and "fixed" (Vargo and Lusch 2004) can be a resource and that objects (and types of stuff) are, by some kind of postulate, static and fixed. The very use of the words 'static' and 'fixed', to connote objects and stuff, is revealing for many reasons. To begin with, it suggests once more that something being-thus-and-so is uninteresting: it is a merely "static" or "fixed" condition. SDL clearly suggests that something capable of generating value cannot "be" (a resource), but rather ought to be understood as "becoming" a resource, because it assumes that being is the opposite of acting. That is a classic case of ontophobia.[19]

It ought to be noted that, contrary to SDL's suggestion, since the times of Plato and Aristotle 'dynamis' (Lat. 'potentia': power, potential), 'energeia' (Lat. 'actus': act, being at work), and 'entelecheia' (accomplishment, achievement) feature amongst the very defining meanings of 'being', and that all sorts of activities are considered fundamental attributes of beings ("categories") in most classical ontologies. There is no obvious sense in which being is the opposite of doing. Rather, "agere sequitur esse" is one of the most famous ontology quotes of all times, precisely with the meaning that being is a root and precondition of acting and that what something is is essential to what sorts of things it can legitimately be expected to do: for example, being a barber is not the opposite of shaving people,

being a knife is not the opposite of cutting things, being inflammable is not the opposite of catching fire.

SDL's refusal to grant significant roles to objects and materials betrays the influence of a long tradition of suspicion with respect to entities, which Postmodernism took up and radicalised. The whole ontology of value of SDL may, therefore, be summarised in three antirealist claims:

- entities (stuff, objects, things, even goods or products,) are not central to value creation;
- entities may become valuable only insofar as they are operated upon by knowledge and skills and insofar as they can store such knowledge and skills;
- "goods are" mere "distribution mechanisms for service provision", there is nothing inherent in them worth considering. The "matter, embodied with knowledge is an appliance for the performance of services".

(Vargo and Lusch 2004, 14)

SDL's insistence upon the negligible relevance of goods and objects in general is paradoxical: on the one hand, it is claimed that there is nothing intrinsically relevant or valuable about goods, because goods only become resources insofar as they are operated upon by competencies, skills, and knowledge. That sounds to us like claiming that words (and phones, and apps, and the world wide web) are irrelevant to communication, because what matters is what people have to say to each other. On the other hand, it is admitted (and it could not be otherwise) that it is precisely through goods that valuable intangible services arise. We do not intend to deny that SDL is right about the centrality of services to value, but we claim that goods can provide the services they do, also because they are as they are, and we can do certain things with them, precisely because they are that way: one cannot shave with a hammer or drive a needle into a wall with a razor, or cook with a pair of socks. Indeed, ingenuity consists also in revealing a certain unexpressed potential in things and situations.

Let us start with the claim that goods are mere service distribution mechanisms, and that skills and competencies are merely encapsulated in them. We would like to claim that that is only half the story, at best, but if it is passed off as a correct ontological model, it is an exercise in sleight of hand: it is true that the value of most offerings depends partly upon skills and competencies provided by their users, who are thereby not simply consumers but rather co-producers of that value. However, that does not reduce the significance of the goods themselves as bearers of the relevant features: hammers, spades, tennis rackets, skis, pans, TV sets, smartphones, and what not only provide services to skilled hammerers, diggers, tennis players, skiers, cooks, TV and smartphone users, etc. But what those users are skilled at is precisely operating those very objects as

objects of those types with their typical traits. If I cannot cook, I cannot turn a lobster into a tasty meal. True, but if I cannot cook lobster, I cannot turn a lobster into a tasty meal either. SDL's ontological prestidigitation consists in correctly highlighting the skills involved in use while at the same time neglecting the very object-relatedness of those skills.

Our point generalises: in order for the relevant skills and competencies to spread significantly, the relevant goods must circulate and be familiar to users already. A certain pair of skis cannot provide the service of skiing to a certain person unless that person can ski; but no one can have the relevant skiing skills unless skis—with their typical skiing-enabling features—have been invented and have circulated. The necessary skills and competencies that SDL considers necessary to activate the potential services "encapsulated" in goods are, in fact, skills and competencies at least partly pertaining to the use of those very goods, with their typical objectual features. That is why practice is so relevant to most skills. Secondly, if we consider the knowledge (skills, competencies) "encapsulated" in goods by their producers (and even more originally by their inventors), we are not only ready to admit that objects can store knowledge, but we enthusiastically embrace such a perspective. Indeed, throughout the many vicissitudes of humankind, objects (goods, in particular) have been amongst the most widespread devices for the dissemination of knowledge. The wheel, the plough, the stirrup, the loom, the sail, the saw, the pan, the lamp, the book, and all sorts of devices invented by humankind have been incredibly efficient competence transmission and dissemination systems: but they have been that also thanks to their very features (shape, design, fabric, machinery, material, elasticity, functioning, transitions, states). The plough has transmitted and disseminated a certain agricultural competence and skill which is embodied in its shape and material, if combined with the relevant user abilities. A fishing line or a pan could not have stored or transmitted that knowledge.

Another aspect that is underestimated by SDL is the irreducibility of goods to services: most goods are designed to provide some kind of "service", but, as objects, they have traits that cannot be reduced to such pre-established services and may provide an opportunity for creative use. A table can be used as a desk, an empty bottle as a candleholder, egg-packaging as isolation material for a recording studio. That is not because goods are whatever they are made to be by creative competences and skills but for the opposite reason: because they are objects, and as such, they host unexpressed potentialities, which are not confined to the type of service they were designed to provide. The type of uses they may be put to is inspired, but also constrained, by their objectual traits.

If we turn to the thesis that there are no resources, because the only resources are operant (and not operand) ones, that is, ingenuity and skills, we find a similar unjustified one-sidedness. The claim that nothing is, of itself, a resource but whatever is made to be a resource is turned into one

by some skills or competencies, is unilateral, for two reasons: a conceptual reason and a more *sachlich* reason. The conceptual reason is related to its by now familiar circular form: if there are no resources, because things are only turned into resources by "ingenuity" and "skills", well, ingenuity and skills count as such precisely because they include knowledge about the properties and dispositions of the relevant objects or materials. Hence, a type of material (or an object) may be turned into a resource by a certain skill or competency only because that skill or competency includes a knowledge of the properties and dispositions of that type of material. The material, its properties, its dispositions, are conceptually involved in the very idea of competence and skill with respect to it.

The second reason to consider that claim as an exaggeration is much more down-to-earth. Not only is it conceptually unilateral to maintain that there are no resources, it is also in contradiction with actual practice and experience. New uses of all sorts of materials, from silicon to petrol, wood, and carbon, to all sorts of metals and alloys continually emerge out of laboratory analyses and experiments with their properties and dispositions. All sorts of other materials are pressed and frozen, ignited, stretched, oxidised, rubbed, and heaven knows what else, in order to discover further properties and dispositions they have, such as conductivity, inflammability, hardness, malleability, ductility, elasticity, oxidisability, opaqueness, resistance, with an eye on their possible technical applications and commercial uses. It is true that their potential as resources is discovered and revealed by the kind of expertise we find in those labs and research centres, but it is plain that such an expertise consists exactly in better and better knowledge of what those very materials "are", which is therefore everything but fixed or inert. Again, we do not intend to downplay the relevance of ingenuity, skills, services, and immaterial entities in general. On the contrary, we intend to insist upon the fact that those very precious phenomena can be understood only if one keeps an eye on objectual and thingly components, instead of attempting to discard them. Entities, with their traits which are only apparently inert, are the branches upon which services sit.

Notes

1. The relation between featuring in certain contexts with a certain value and being in a certain way is upheld also by some realist philosophers, who nevertheless insist upon reference to reality as a central issue. Cf. Benoist (2017, 11): "On ne peut, là où il est question de réalité, faire abstraction de ces 'dimensions' qui sont aussi bien celles des pratiques selon lesquelles nous nous y orientons"; Gabriel (2015, 13): "I do not intend to maintain that there are no objects independent of the linguistically articulated descriptions we use to pick out objects. Rather, my position is that objects are individuated by descriptions that objectively hold good of them regardless of whether anyone is apprehending the facts about the objects. Loosely speaking, senses are part

of the furniture of reality, which is why reality can appear to us without thereby somehow being distorted".

2. Derrida (1967b, Eng. tr. 54): "One could call *play* the absence of the transcendental signified making play boundless, that is to say as the shaking up of onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence" (emphasis in the original).
3. The very expressions 'real' and 'reality' derive from the Latin 'realis/e' and 'realitas', which, in turn, are modelled upon the noun '*res*' (thing), which is used to express the idea of (typically inanimate) physical entities but also of matters of concern. That etymological relation is present in Germanic languages, too (Latour 2004). The most common features ascribed by philosophical tradition to thingliness (realitas) are spatial extension (res extensa), temporal duration (res temporalis), and robustness (res materialis). Cf. Husserl (1913, § 139).
4. We use the terms 'objectual', 'objectualist', and 'objectualism' (as opposed to the more traditional and epistemological-sounding ones 'objective', objectivist', and 'objectivism'), to refer, respectively, to features ascribed to objects themselves (objectual), as opposed to the way they may be experienced or related to and to the frameworks which grant priority or exclusive interest to such features (objectualist frameworks/objectualism).
5. For an analysis of the paradoxes generated by the positing of a domain beyond the limits of thought, cf. Priest (2002, 85–101).
6. Hirschman and Holbrook (1982) uphold a rigorous and scientific ("objective") approach but insist upon the very scientific relevance of subjective phenomena and criticise exclusive interest in (what we call) objectual features.
7. Notice that the phrase is equivocal in conflating intangible and aesthetic aspects of consumption, on the one hand, with subjective ones, that is, with aspects of consumption which are by definition relative to a subject, thereby implying that aesthetic and intangible features are subjective, or, conversely, that subjectiveness is in a way correlated to intangible traits and aesthetic properties of products.
8. Schmitt (2000, 63): "marketing appeals to the senses", to "sensory experiences through sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell"; it "appeals to customers' inner feelings and emotions, with the objective of creating affective experiences that range from mildly positive moods linked to a brand . . . to strong emotions of joy and pride" (p. 64), and "to the intellect with the objective of creating cognitive, problem-solving experiences that engage customers creatively" (p. 65), as well as to "bodily experiences, lifestyles, and interactions" (p. 66). Finally, EM "expands beyond the individual's personal, private feelings, thus adding to 'individual experiences' and relating the individual to his or her ideal self, other people, or cultures" (*ibid*.).
9. "The necessary methodological shift thus leads towards a more phenomenological approach" (137); "This experiential perspective is phenomenological in spirit and regards consumption as a primarily subjective state of consciousness with a variety of symbolic meanings, hedonic responses, and esthetic criteria", (134).
10. The status and conditions of shared experiences are philosophically disputed: on the one hand, experience is supposed to be taking place at an individual level, on the other, the existence of shared experiences seems to be presupposed by social phenomena and by communication in particular. Cf. Gilbert (2009); Searle (2010, 42–60); Tomasello (2008). A radical presentation of the issue of experience as irreducibly individual is found in Husserl's (1931) famous *Fifth Meditation*.
11. Carù and Cova (2007b) claim that EM focuses "on the company's planning and implementation of what it is offering, while accentuating the idea that

the outcome should be something that is very significant and unforgettable for the consumer living through this experience" (11).

12. Carù and Cova (2007b, 11): "there has been a great deal of criticism of the limited and planned nature of these consuming experiences", as they are "very manipulative and predetermined and therefore meet with resistance from some consumers".
13. 'Authenticity' and 'authentic', from Old French 'authentique', from late Latin 'authenticus', from ancient Greek 'authentikos', something having a legitimate source or origin, from 'authentes', a perpetrator, someone carrying out an act (not rarely: a murder) with their own hands, from 'autos' (self) + 'anuo' (to accomplish). Hence the double sense of 'authentic' as real, genuine, as opposed to (say) forged, counterfeited, and being one's own, as opposed to being any one, being 'they', being 'impersonal'.
14. Nietzsche (1889, Eng. tr. 20): "5. The 'true' world—an idea which is no longer good for anything, not even obligating—an idea which has become useless and superfluous—consequently, a refuted idea: let us abolish it!"
15. For instance, a conventionalist ethnologist, who assumes that all institutions exist by convention, would commit a fallacy of ascription if she modelled all human populations as themselves believing that all institutions exist by convention, thereby misrepresenting the fact that many populations do not consider all their institutions as existing by convention, but rather consider at least some of them as (say) having a divine or natural origin.
16. The Pentecost is an episode in *Acts of the Apostles* (2: 1–31), reporting the descending of inspiration and new competences and skills upon the apostles as a consequence of an intervention by the Holy Spirit. In what follows, we are making no claims about Pentecostalism as a religious movement or about Pentecostal communities. We are exclusively referring to theoretical issues in the philosophy of meaning and institutions, which, according to Ferraris (2018), have analogies with the story of the Pentecost.
17. Husserl (1913, Eng. tr. 110, slightly altered). Husserl is referring to the difference between consciousness and mundane entities, evoking Descartes's (1644) concept of substance: "Per substantiam nihil aliud intelligere possumus, quam rem quae ita existit, ut nulla alia re indigeat ad existendum". (Eng. tr., 23): "By 'substance' we can understand nothing other than a thing which exists in such a way that it needs no other thing in order to exist"). Derrida's (1967a) criticism of Husserl's phenomenology was inspired by the rejection of the idea of meaning as something extrinsically bestowed upon mundane entities by a self-contained and hierarchically superior spiritual source.
18. SDL plastically adheres to what has been described by Harman (2018, *Introduction*) as "the fashionable holistic philosophies of our time, which hold that everything is defined purely by its relations and that the world is nothing but the total system of these relations", thus excluding the idea that "objects" may be "mutually autonomous and enter into relation only in special cases that need to be explained rather than assumed".
19. It is interesting to consider that, etymologically speaking, some of the core meanings of the verb to 'be' are growing, living, flourishing, becoming.

Part 2

The Significance of Realism

4 The Persisting Relevance of Reality

In what follows, we shall outline theoretical strategies and arguments developed by thinkers belonging to the new wave of philosophical realism that characterised the beginning of the twenty-first century. We shall also delve into theoretical opportunities for the social sciences in general and for management in particular, made available by the ground-breaking work of new realist philosophers. In particular, we shall focus upon philosophical theses developed in social ontology, in the philosophy of perception, and in related topics that are considered by some realist philosophers as the most promising fields of philosophical enquiry at present. Such fields are also, for obvious reasons, the most promising ones for theoretical and methodological innovations in management and marketing research. In particular, we shall attempt to steer clear of the temptation to be content with realist arguments in favour of the existence of at least some mind-independent physical entities such as mountain chains on Mars or chemical reactions in remote galaxies.

We are convinced that realism best expresses its theoretical potential if it is not limited to the thesis that, in principle, the existence of something irreducible to any perspective (perhaps on some remote planet) cannot be excluded, and if it is interpreted as an all-round proposal with something to say not only to geologists or astronomers but also to social scientists, graphic designers, political activists, performing artists, managers, and economists: if realism represents the thesis that reality is much more than just something we cannot completely rule out and makes the much stronger claim that reality is right here, all the time.

Postmodernism did not invent antirealism but rather developed it in new forms, boosting its popularity and turning it into a sort of mainstream position. If we consider philosophy proper, contrary to what is sometimes assumed in other disciplines, postmodernist antirealism (and Postmodernism in general) progressively lost momentum during the first decades of the twenty-first century, despite retaining part of its prestige in popular culture and in parts of academia.[1]

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The decline of postmodernist antirealism was in part caused by the persuasiveness of theoretical challenges launched against it by leading philosophers who had never subscribed to it and had continued to nurture alternative perspectives, especially, but not exclusively, in North American academia (cf. Searle 1995, Boghossian 2006). It was also determined by long-term consequences of new trends in academic debates, prompted by the Neo-Cartesian and cognitive turn in linguistics (Chomsky 1966; Fodor 1975, 1983), by the project of a naturalised epistemology (Quine 1969)[2] and also by the emancipation of metaphysics from the secular yoke of epistemology (Kripke 1980). The decline of antirealism was catalysed by the often slow and quiet, but at times sudden and sensational, conversion to realism of leading philosophers, traditionally belonging to the antirealist front or coming from antirealist backgrounds (Ferraris [1997] 2011).

Indeed, if one considers the philosophical landscape nowadays, from the most scholarly and academically rigorous thinkers to the most popular *enfants terribles* of philosophy, disseminating their views through the blogosphere, one finds a vast and diverse flourishing of proudly self-proclaimed "realist" research programmes, "realist" theoretical positions, "realist" reinterpretations of classical texts, series in "realism" studies, and so forth.

In a remarkable turning of the tables, Postmodernism, which had long flirted with the idea of *épater les bourgeois* with its radical antirealism, has started to arouse yawns in its audiences, instead of the traditional rage. Realism is counterattacking with arguments, intellectual challenges, speculations, and (not always mutually compatible) theses and programmes. The return of realism is even accompanied by a certain air of condescendence, or conceit, if not of open contempt, for Postmodernism, often identified as the quintessential antirealist paradigm: "once you state the claims and arguments of the antirealists out in the open, naked and undisguised, they tend to look fairly ridiculous" (Searle 1995, 158); "I said I would defend realism against attacks made on it, but frankly I have trouble finding any powerful attacks that seem worth answering" (*ibid*.). Postmodernist arguments "would be of only passing interest were it not for the enormous influence of the general philosophical perspective they represent" (Boghossian 2006, 2); "Bien sûr, comme toujours, nous vivons dans un monde réel matériel et le *bullshit* tapé sur son ordinateur par l'intellectuel post-moderne à propos de la supposée dé-réalisation de ce monde n'ôte pas une once de réalité à ce fait" (Benoist 2017, 57).[3]

Before beginning our discussion of this shift in approach, we wish to reaffirm that Postmodernist antirealism is an archipelago of recognisably different, original, and often courageous philosophical positions; that postmodernist thought has exerted a fruitful influence upon a wide variety of subjects; it has played an innovative role for many decades, has enjoyed respectable theoretical standards and *bona fide* philosophical credentials, at least in its most classic formulations, as opposed, perhaps, to

its vulgarisation and trivialisation in certain branches of scholarly work, or in popular culture. However, the very vulgarisation of postmodernist theses is, in some way, a further symptom of its enormous appeal also outside academia, of its ability to express deep-felt issues of its time and of its capacity to influence contemporary culture at large. And it is all the more revealing that academia and popular culture have begun to bid farewell to it.

Antirealist positions in metaphysics, semantics, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, ethics, and philosophy of mathematics have been elaborated throughout the centuries, making use of sophisticated philosophical tools, and have been represented by some of the most prominent philosophers of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. There can be little doubt about their philosophical pedigrees. Trite antirealist slogans cannot be mistaken for antirealism as such, any more than realist theoretical positions can be equated with lack of philosophical sophistication or symptoms of psychological neurosis.

Finally, antirealism and Postmodernism are anything but simple and easy positions to spell out, diagnose, and overcome, as is clearly demonstrated by the difficulty with which formerly antirealist philosophers have been trying to re-couch their respective positions within realist frameworks, as well as by the frequency with which new realist philosophers are reproaching each other of still expressing *au fond* antirealist positions (Harman 2011a; Benoist 2017, 9–13).

The most sensational feature of the recent neo-realist wave is the conversion to realism by some leading personalities in continental Europe, long considered a stronghold of postmodernist antirealism. And, in fact, someone who studied philosophy in continental Europe in the last quarter of the twentieth century is very likely to have encountered widespread scepticism about, if not contempt for, realist arguments and positions, which in philosophical departments across continental Europe were often met with condescendence rather than with arguments. "Naïve realism", before morphing into the label of a sophisticated philosophical position (Putnam 1994; Campbell 2002), circulated in continental Europe as a *charge* of philosophical incompetence against undergraduate students, annoying lecturing faculty with purportedly pre-philosophical realist reservation with respect to often trite postmodernist theses about the language-relativity of truth, the theory-ladenness of perception, or the inconceivability of a reality independent of human experience.[4]

However, over the past quarter of a century, philosophical allegiances have started to shift from antirealism to realism. Even more interestingly, fresh perspectives are currently being elaborated, new phenomena are being discovered or highlighted, novel categories are being moulded, and previously new intellectual territories are being spotted, trodden upon, and charted by realist philosophers in our times. That is the truly interesting challenge. The return of a realist sensitivity has accompanied a

broad variety of philosophical novelties and innovations, which we shall illustrate as follows:

- rehabilitation of the notion of reality, as independent of all language, experience, knowledge, or mind, that is, of reality without brackets (Benoist 2011; Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011a; Ferraris 2012; Gabriel 2014a);
- interest in the variety of realms, fields, or domains that make up reality, with the consequential development of specific ontologies (Searle 1995, 2010; DeLanda 2006; Ferraris 2009; Gabriel 2015; Harman 2016);
- fresh attention to objects as legitimate denizens of philosophical discourse, and to the varieties thereof, in particular social objects, ideal objects, and even quasi-objects (Harman 2002, 2018; Garcia 2010; Bogost 2012; Bryant 2014);
- interest in the more robust and apparently less context-sensitive aspects of human experience, and in particular in perception, as a legitimate and independent source of information, as opposed to language or theory (Ferraris (1997) 2011, 2012; Searle 2015);
- attention to the degrees and forms of reality's independence of human thought and experience, for example, to the independence of physical, chemical, biological, paleontological reality, but also of social, cultural, or institutional reality (Searle 1995; Boghossian 2006; Badiou 2006; Meillassoux 2006);
- rehabilitation of partially discredited notions, such as knowledge and truth, as possible manifestations of reality or accurate representations thereof (Williamson 2000; Williams 2002; Boghossian 2006);
- resistance to all attempts to reduce questions about reality itself to questions regarding language, knowledge, conceptualisation, historical background, or scientific practice (Harman 2011a; Gabriel 2015; Ferraris 2012, 2018);
- interest in the position of thought, language, knowledge, and human reality in general, within the structure of reality at large (Searle 1983, 1995; Millikan 1984; Fodor 1987; Kim 1998; Ferraris 2013).

4.1 The Rehabilitation of Reality

The rehabilitation of talk about reality is one of the main aspects of the discussion about realism in contemporary philosophy (Searle 1995, 149–198). Indeed, the feature shared by almost all contemporary realist philosophers is the belief that it makes sense to talk of reality as being independent of its being represented in certain ways: "*Realism is the view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations*" (155, emphasis in the original); "The world (or

alternatively, reality or the universe) exists independently of our representations of it" (150).[5]

It makes sense to talk of an independently existing reality, it is claimed, of a reality which is exactly what beliefs, theories, sentences, scientific systems, or religious convictions may be right or wrong about (Ferraris 2012, 2014b). We have, or may have, excellent reasons to believe that large portions of reality existed long before human language and human cultures appeared on planet earth (Searle 1995; Boghossian 2006; Meillassoux 2006), that other large portions thereof exist now without being conceptualised, talked about, or even imagined by any human being whatsoever (Searle 1995), and that even the portions of reality that we talk or think about, if we are right about them, are as they are, regardless of the way or ways in which we talk or think about them, so they would have been the way they are even if they had never been talked about by humans or by any other creature: "if we had never existed, if there had never been any representations—any statements, beliefs, perceptions, thoughts, etc.—most of the world would have remained unaffected" (Searle 1995, 153). Hence: "When we all die, and all our representations die with us, most features of the world will remain totally unaffected; they will go on exactly as before" (*ibid.*).[6]

Total independence of any representation in any possible way or sense is not a requisite of realist ontology: the existence and features of certain types of real entities depend upon the existence of human representations (Searle 1995, 153; DeLanda 2006);[7] however, as we shall see, the point of dispute between realists and antirealists is not the possible dependence upon any mental states whatsoever. The point is whether something's existing and being in a certain way depends upon its being represented as being in that way and not generically whether something's existence depends upon the existence of human representations. Quite intuitively, the existence of antibiotics, farms, tunnels, shipwrecks, nuclear explosions, pollution, global warming, and animal extinction, depends upon the existence of human representations (most notably, of those used by pharmaceutics, agricultural knowledge, civil engineering, automotive industry, gas extraction, fossil fuel refining, and so forth); but that does not make those entities less real. The point is whether the chair I am sitting on, with its shape, bulk, weight, and elasticity, exists and is as it is, only because—and insofar as—I consider it to be that way; or whether we can make chairs (and pollution, and animal extinction, but—we shall see—also racism, inflation, sovereign debt) go away, simply by realising that they depend upon the existence of human representations: the representations they depend upon are the ones of their designers and producers, together with the ones of those who design, produce, and provide their components, not those of the ones who talk about them or perceive them. Something's causally depending upon the existence of human representations is not to be confused with its dependence upon its being represented

by someone to be in that way. As we shall see, from a realist perspective, the question may be reversed: are there any cases of things that only exist and are as they are because of their being considered to exist and to be in that way?

4.1.1 Independence of Human Existence

We have good reasons to believe that specimens of the species *Tyrannosaurus rex* really lived their lives in a completely real world in which no human beings were around to perceive them, or to otherwise linguistically articulate or conceptualise their factual existence, or to discriminate them in any way whatsoever from other species: they simply existed there and then, and their existence there and then is a fact of the matter, independent of whatever humans, including scientists, may ever come to believe: "there are many features of Mount Everest, for example, the sort of features that I represent if I make a statement such as "Mt. Everest has snow and ice near its summit", which would have remained totally unaffected if no one had ever represented them in any fashion and will not be affected by the demise of these or any other representations". (Searle 1995, *loc. cit.*): Notice that the point of this claim is not causal independence of any representation in any possible sense. Consider, for instance, that

> [A]s the result of large-scale climate changes produced by human technologies . . . —especially global warming caused by the burning of fossil fuels and damage to the ozone layer caused by the use of chlorofluorocarbons—we have entered a new historical stage . . . . Human intervention has affected everything, and so everything in the world is different from what it would otherwise "naturally" be.
>
> (Vogel [2015, 2], the thesis is ascribed to McKibben [1989/2006, 58-ff.])

Of course, the sense in which there being snow at the summit of Mt. Everest does not depend upon human representation (of its so being) is different from the one in which it does depend upon them (e.g. upon human economies, technologies, and so forth). There is no reason to equate realism with the foolish thesis that whatever exists is the way it is independently of any human representation in any possible sense: the chemical composition of arctic ocean waters partly depends upon the presence of microplastics, which in turn depends on human industrial design, packaging, and logistics, which of course include all sorts of representations.

4.1.2 Independence of Human Discovery

Not only did specimens of *Tyrannosaurus rex* really exist before human beings did, they would have existed even if human scientists had never

developed palaeontology, or, if you prefer, even if, after the extinction of the species *Tyrannosaurus rex*, life on earth had evolved so differently from the way it did, as not to produce the very species *Homo sapiens* (or any other species capable of developing palaeontology). Simply, for a realist, "the world exists independently not only of language but also of thought, perception, belief, etc." (Searle 1995, 153).

Intuitively, there are large portions of the universe that are not perceived or known in any way by humans, that are not causally related to us, due to their distance and to the given physical constants (velocity of light etc.), such that what is going on there is in no way represented, imagined, or discussed in any scientific theory or other form of human discourse (except, if you like, in the formal or trivial fashion of referring to it *in abstracto* as 'unknown reality'). Despite not being known, perceived, or otherwise conceptualised, such portions of the universe, their properties, states, relations, transformations, and so on are normally taken to be real, as are all the portions of reality inaccessible to human beings. Against this intuition, antirealists of all centuries have claimed that all reality must be at least in principle knowable, that an unknown or even unknowable reality—or a reality with no relation whatsoever to human experience or interpretation—is somehow inconceivable or even contradictory. We find an early version of perspectival reductionism in Berkeley's *Treatise* (1710):

> The table I write on, I say, exists, that is, I see and feel it; and if I were out of my study I should say it existed, meaning thereby that if I was in my study I might perceive it. There was an odour, that is, it was smelled; there was a sound, that is to say, it was heard; a colour or figure, and it was perceived by sight or touch. This is all that I can understand by these and the like expressions. For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seems perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.
>
> (104)

A similar attitude is at work in Kant's (1763, § 1) early analysis of existential statements in terms of reports about actual or possible observations.

However, as we shall see, arguments for the inexistence of an unknown reality are quite inconclusive and lead to paradoxes (Fitch 1963; Williamson 2000, 270–301; Meillassoux 2006).[8]

4.1.3 Independence of Perception or Experience

Even the reality we do, *de facto*, talk, think, and know about—the reality familiar to us human beings in ordinary life and business, as well as in science or history—is, by and large, taken to be what it is, independently

of our talking, thinking, and knowing about it. Our talk, thought, and knowledge about reality is either true to it or not, but, if it is, that is because it correctly represents reality as it is (and not the other way around); and, if it is not true to it, that is because it represents reality as being what, in fact, it is not (Searle 1995, 199–226). The position, as Benoist (2017, 61) admits, goes back to Aristotle's (1984) clarification of the notion of being true in *Metaph*. IX, 10, 1051b: "It is not because we are right in thinking that you are white that you are white; it is because you are white that we are right in saying so".

Realist philosophers tend to argue that, when a thought, a belief, a theory, an image, or a sentence correctly represents the world, they do so because they represent it as it really is and not simply as it appears in, or responds to, that particular conceptual-framework or experience-setting. Knowledge is knowledge of reality, and knowledge of reality is not knowledge of reality-as-known-by-us, but, indeed, knowledge of a reality that is as it is independently of its being known to be thus (Meillassoux 2006, Ch. 1). That is taken to count not only for geological, biological, astronomical, or chemical entities but also for artefacts and even for conventional reality (DeLanda 2006): the fact that conventional entities (languages and institutions, for instance) emerge out of human communities and involve human capacities to represent things in certain ways does not entail that social entities exist only relative to their being represented to be in certain ways. One can be mistaken about verb conjugations, balance sheets, inflation rates, consumption patterns, and brand policies, just as one can be mistaken about the amount of snow near the summit of Mt. Everest: "most social entities, from small communities to large nation-states, would disappear altogether if human minds ceased to exist. In this sense social entities are clearly not mind-independent" (DeLanda 2006, 1). Therefore,

> [A] realist approach to social ontology must assert the autonomy of social entities from the conceptions we have of them. To say that social entities have a reality that is conception-independent is simply to assert that the theories, models, and classifications we use to study them may be objectively wrong, that is, that they may fail to capture the real history and internal dynamics of those entities.
>
> (*ibid*.)

4.2 Arguments for the Existence of a Reality Independent of Human Perspectives

New realist philosophers question a number of long-standing assumptions dating back to transformations and shifts in modern philosophy and especially some crucial tenets of post-Kantian philosophy (Ferraris 2004): most notably, the claim that the only way of making sense of the

possibility of knowledge is to think that it does not represent an independently existing reality (things "considered in themselves") but only reality as experienced by finite subjects. In order to support their claims, realist philosophers appeal to arguments for the rejection of the conceptual-relativity, language-relativity, and interest-relativity of things, events, facts, and truths. Two of the most typical arguments against the dependence of reality upon language or human experience are the rejection of causal dependence and the rejection of representational dependence.

Causal Independence

Causal dependence is the thesis that facts are literally brought about by language, experience, or representation. Take, for instance, the following claims, discussed by Boghossian (2006): "when French scientists working on the mummy of Ramses II (who died c. 1213 BC) concluded that Ramses probably died of tuberculosis, Latour denied that this was possible. 'How could he pass away due to a bacillus discovered by Robert Koch in 1882?' Latour asked. . . . 'Before Koch, the bacillus had no real existence'" (26, the quotation is from Latour [1998]).

The passage really seems to suggest allegiance to causal dependence of tuberculosis upon scientific research. Ferraris (2012) vividly comments on this famously bold claim that:

> [I]f the birth of a disease truly coincided with its discovery, we should immediately suspend all medical research, as we already have more than enough diseases: the true cause of the world's evils would turn out to be no longer Pandora (as we thought) but Asclepius.
>
> (32)

Representational Independence

Reality's purported lack of independence from language or experience, which most postmodernist antirealist philosophers seem to have in mind when they talk about the social construction of facts, or nothing being "*hors-texte*", cannot be causal non-independence; if it were, their proposal would be utterly absurd to the point of imagining that all diseases are caused by medical research and that dinosaur species were actually brought about by palaeontologists, or even that the earth as a planet was brought into existence by geologists. A consequence of this position would be that human beings themselves were created by, say, theologians or evolutionary biologists, that is, by the ones who came up with stories about the origin of humankind.[9]

Boghossian (2006) claims that the postmodernist view that there are no facts about a reality that is independent of human language, thought, or knowledge is due to a form of fact constructivism (or "constructionism")

argued for by many philosophers, most notably by Goodman, Putnam, and Rorty.[10] According to fact constructionism, a fact does not simply hold good of a thing or a situation: it is rather constructed as a fact by human beings, most notably by "accepting a way of talking or thinking which describes that fact" (Boghossian 2006, 27).

Language and description are supposed to be productive of facts. In Goodman's (1978, 94) own words, as quoted by Boghossian (2006, 27): "we make worlds by making versions". Versions produce worlds or, in Rorty's (1998) formulation:

> [B]efore you describe [*something*] as a dinosaur, or as anything else, there is no sense to the claim that it is "out there" having properties. . . . there is no description-independent way the world is, no way it is under no description.
>
> (87)

Similar positions are ascribed by Searle (1995) to "Michael Dummett, Nelson Goodman, Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, Hilary Putnam . . ., Jacques Derrida, Humberto Maturana, Francisco Varela, and Terry Winograd" (157).

Rorty (1998) seems to claim not only that there are no facts independently of descriptions, but even that there is nothing "out there" for descriptions to describe, for example, no dinosaurs or no entities that are in fact dinosaurs, independently of their so being described. Descriptions are considered as true only of described objects and as productive of the facts that hold good of such objects, if not of objects themselves.

For Rorty, facts can be said to hold good of something, only insofar as they involve something that is what it is due to some human activity (in this case the human activity of describing it). Boghossian (2006) calls this thesis "*Description Dependence of Facts*": "there cannot be a fact of the matter as to how things are with the world independently of our propensity to *describe* the world as being a certain way" (28, emphasis in the original). Description Dependence appears to derive from an illegitimate conflation of two theses:

- the possibly correct thesis that all descriptions are constitutively perspectival and therefore in a way relative to a specific conceptual, linguistic, theoretical, or generally cultural framework;
- the completely different thesis that reality itself (i.e. the very conditions described) is relative to a description and that therefore different descriptions somehow bring about or generate the features or facts they describe.

However, contrary to that line of argument: "From the fact that a *description* can only be made relative to a set of linguistic categories, it

does not follow that the *facts/objects/states of affairs/etc.*, *described* can only *exist* relative to a set of categories" (Searle 1995, 166, emphasis in the original)"; "the real world does not care how we describe it and it remains the same under the various different descriptions we give of it" (163).

Realist philosophers have no problem with acknowledging that descriptions exist only relative to specific perspectives (languages, interests, concepts, practices, etc.). Descriptions may, therefore, be legitimately considered as perspective-dependent. However, realists insist that what matches or does not match descriptions—the very things or properties or states of affairs described by such descriptions—does not itself exist only relative to the way it is described. Descriptions may be perspective-dependent, but that does not amount to reality being itself description-(and therefore perspective-)dependent. The *prima facie* plausibility of the thesis that properties and facts exist only relative to descriptions seems to derive from the implausibility of so-called metaphysical realism, a position defined by Putnam (1981c) as a threefold claim including the thesis that there exists exactly one correct description of the way things are:

> On this perspective, the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of "the way the world is". Truth involves some sort of correspondence relation between words or thought-signs and external things and sets of things.
>
> (49)

Putnam's definition of metaphysical realism may be considered as a convincing reservation against realism. If we refuse to accept that there is exactly one correct description of reality, then, it is claimed, we must accept the thesis that there is no way things themselves are independent of whether or how they are described.

Rorty used a similar line of argument, deriving the claim that things are not "out there" with their properties (independently of the descriptions that ascribe such properties to them) from the rejection of the counter-intuitive claim that that there are intrinsically better or worse descriptions of the way things are, or indeed that there is exactly one best description of the way they are. What counts as a better or the best description depends upon all sorts of considerations, including pragmatic ones. However, maintaining that, excluding particular cases, things are the way they are independently of how (or even of whether) they are described, does not commit one to the much stronger claim that there is exactly one correct description of the way things are, or that there are intrinsically better or worse descriptions of the way they are, independent of pragmatic and theoretical interests. Realism is not a thesis about descriptions, it is a thesis about the way things are, whether described or not.

It may be true, for realists, that there are many alternative ways of describing and re-describing one and the same thing, process, or event, or of stating one and the same fact. It may be true that there are different and legitimate levels of description, even of scientific description, of one and the same thing or process. But that does not lead to a dependence of the conditions described upon the descriptions given. One may actually argue for the contrary thesis: the existence of countless alternative correct descriptions of the very same things, and the existence of different levels of descriptions thereof, is not a sign of description-dependence but of description-independence: being real is not being correlated to a description or a set of descriptions, but being there and hence being describable in countless ways while remaining irreducible to any of them or to all of them jointly.

Secondly, the very talk of different correct descriptions of the same things presupposes what the general antirealist claim seems to deny: that there is one and the same thing, that is what it is (and as it is) regardless of its being described in different ways. But, even granted that there are different descriptions of the same reality, it would not follow that what all such descriptions describe and what all such statements express is in itself undetermined, with respect to being what it is and how it is, or to having certain properties and relations. Expressed in Rortyan terms: the existence of legitimate alternative descriptions of the same thing or condition does not entail that what is so variously described is not itself "out there" and is not as it is, regardless of being described in certain ways.

4.3 Truth without Thought and Language

An oblique way of suggesting that it is impossible to make sense of the idea that there is some way things are, or facts about them, independent of human perspectives, is to claim that the existence, not of reality, but of truths about it, rests upon some kind of possibly broad anthropic or semiotic condition, for instance, upon the existence of (human) language or culture.

In one possible translation of Wittgenstein's (1953, §241) words: "It is what human beings *say* that is true and false".[11] Interpreted in these terms, the claim that the existence of truth depends upon the existence of thought or language may sound trivial: if there were no statements, there would be no true statements either.

We may construct a possible argument as follows:

i. by 'states of affairs' or 'facts' we mean conditions expressed by truths;
ii. truth is a property of statements;
iii. if there were no truths, there would be no conditions expressed by them;

iv. if there were no humans, there would be no statements;
v. if there were no humans, there would be no truths (from ii. and iv.);
vi. if there were no humans, there would be no facts or states of affairs (from iii. and v.).

We may push the point further by adding that if truth is relative to human languages, then what kinds of things there are partly depends upon what linguistic framework is adopted by a certain community:

> If someone wishes to speak in his language about a new kind of entities, he has to introduce a system of new ways of speaking, subject to new rules; we shall call this procedure the construction of a linguistic *framework* for the new entities in question. And now we must distinguish two kinds of questions of existence: first, questions of the existence of certain entities of the new kind *within the framework*; we call them *internal questions*; and second, questions concerning the existence or reality *of the system of entities as a whole*, called *external questions*. . . .
>
> Once we have accepted the thing language with its framework for things, we can raise and answer internal questions, e.g., "Is there a white piece of paper on my desk?", "Did King Arthur actually live?", "Are unicorns and centaurs real or merely imaginary?", and the like. . . . To recognize something as a real thing or event means to succeed in incorporating it into the system of things at a particular space-time position so that it fits together with the other things recognized as real, according to the rules of the framework. . . . To be real in the scientific sense means to be an element of the system.
>
> (Carnap 1950, 206–208, emphasis in the original)

INDEPENDENT REALITY, ERGO INDEPENDENT TRUTH?

Although the notion of reality evokes independence of perception, interpretation, or opinion, the idea that truth also entails such an independence has been challenged since long before the postmodernist wave (Aquinas 1274, P1, Q1: 16).

The claim against the thesis of an independent existence of truths (or even facts) about the world is that, even if we concede that, had no thinking beings existed, (most of) what happens in the world would have been unaffected, nonetheless, in such circumstances there would have been no truths about the reality and correspondingly no facts holding good of it. In Rorty's (1991d) words: "What is 'be true' supposed to mean in a world in which there are no statements to be true nor minds to have true beliefs?" (quoted in Marconi 2006, 301).

The argument may be spelled out in somewhat Rortyan terms, as follows: thought and language are thoroughly human ways of relating to reality and of coping with it; as such, thought and language are not direct manifestations or expressions of reality, as it is independent of them, but are rather marked by their being expressions of human interests and perspectives; what is true or false are human statements and beliefs; hence, statements and beliefs are not direct manifestations or expressions of reality, as it is independent of human thought and language, but are rather marked by their being relative to human interests and perspectives; hence, what is true or false is neither an expression nor a manifestation of an independently existing reality, but rather a product contingent upon human perspective and interests, as a way of coping with it.

The upshot of such a possible argument could be that, while the existence of a reality completely independent of all human thought and experience may be philosophically acceptable, the existence of a truth independent of human thought and language is much more disputable. Even further, it could be maintained that, while the existence of a reality independent of human thought and language could be speculatively conjectured and admitted as a *noumenon* or *Grenzbegriff*, it would still make sense to claim that that all human beings ever experience, discover, value, talk about, perceive, and accept is not an independently existing reality, but rather a Protagorean domain in which "Man is the measure of all things, of the things that are that they are and of the things that are not that they are not" (Sprague 2001, DK 80B1).

REAL IN ITSELF VERSUS LINGUISTICALLY TRUE FOR US?

This line of argument, though compatible with some version of realism, risks splitting the world into two realms: one (reality) destined to play almost no role at all, because it is portrayed as radically other than what is accessible to human thought and experience; the other (truth) considered as accessible to human thought and language but radically relative to contingent human dispositions and conventions. Hence, a reintroduction of the thesis that all that talking and thinking beings can make sense of is language- and thought-relative. Indeed, why not think that "being that can be understood is language", as Gadamer (1960) famously claimed?[12]

LIMITED TRUTH

Conceding that the existence of truth is contingent upon the existence of human thought and language opens the door to further concessions: why not assume that the existence of truth is sensitive to further, utterly contingent features of human life, such as the contingent number of sensory input types that the human body is capable of detecting, or the contingent

quantity of information that the human nervous system is capable of processing? Indeed, why not think that its being true that ripe tomatoes are red and that sugar is sweet depends upon the contingent fact that humans are able to detect certain patterns of light radiation and certain chemical properties, but that there cannot be truths about features of reality that human beings are perceptually unequipped to detect, or more simply about things that are too far removed from them to causally interact with them?

And if the existence of truth is conditional upon the existence of human language, why not assert that it is also conditional upon the peculiarities of different human languages and forms of discourse? For instance, that there cannot be truths such that humans lack the relevant concepts to grasp them or the computational capacities to process them? That would be the same as claiming that truth does not cover the whole of reality but only the part of reality that humans are able to discover, detect, think, and talk about.

NEW DISCOVERIES OR NEW TRUTHS?

The issue could be pressed further by adding that, when humans acquire new cognitive and linguistic capacities or tools, for example, when they acquire new concepts or scientific methods or ways of considering matters, or simply new interests, the number of truths increases, that it literally becomes true that such and such is the case. That is more or less what a famous passage in the phenomenological-hermeneutic tradition is sometimes taken to claim: "Before Newton's laws were discovered, they were not 'true'. . . . The laws became true through Newton, through them beings in themselves became accessible" (Heidegger 1927, Eng. tr. 208).[13]

It is not difficult to spot a seed of the postmodernist antirealist attitude in these thoughts and to feel the problematic consequences of such a position. To begin with, one might wonder why not accept the converse as equally plausible: if certain laws of mechanics were not true before being discovered by Newton, would they not cease to be true, if humans lost their understanding of the relevant facts in some future? Shall they not cease to be true when humans become extinct? Was their truth intermittent during the time between the moment in which Newton conceived of them, but occasionally doubted them, and the time in which they were accepted by the scientific community? Was there an exact time in which they became true? Was it the moment in which Newton had his first intuitions about them? Was it the moment in which he wrote them down? Was it the moment in which he delivered the manuscript of the *Principia mathematica* to his publisher? Or the moment in which the first copy thereof was printed?

What if Newton had changed his mind and thought his theses were false? Would they have thereby become false? Would they have ceased

to be true? Why? And what about Galileo's astronomical observations? Did they remain true when he abjured them before the tribunal of the Inquisition? If they did remain true despite his abjuration, was it only because (we have reason to believe that) he probably still held them to be true? Does a truth known by one single person (say, a secret) remain a truth after that person has died or while that person is asleep or thinking about something else? If we are prepared to accept that once a truth has been thought or stated, it remains such, no matter whether it is upheld, defended, abjured, or forgotten, why not take a simpler stance and say that truth, at least in most cases, is simply independent of being stated or thought?[14]

RELATIVE TRUTH AND SOCIOLOGISM

Postmodernist thought is fond of the thesis of the language-relativity of truth. Some interpretations of the writings of Foucault suggest that he held that, at least for a large class of statements, those statements being true (or 'true' in brackets) is conditional upon the existence of the relevant social patterns (which he sometimes calls "discourses", cf. Foucault [1971a); Courtine [2015]). Postmodernism eagerly follows this line of argument, which leads directly back to the thesis that whatever human experience comes in contact with is culturally, socially, and linguistically mediated. Further, for a large class of statements, it is controversial whether they have fixed truth conditions or whether their truth conditions are fixed by the relevant context (Recanati 2005). Hence, the language-relativity of truth could entail contextual dependence, another feature for which Postmodernism tends to cheer, against the idea of a robustness and context insensitivity of meaning and truth.[15]

The theoretical autonomy of the claim that reality is independent of all thought and language with respect to the semantically different claim that truth is, is not undisputable, since, for instance, it is intuitively plausible that whatever is accepted as real by a certain individual or community at a certain time tends to overlap with what is accepted as true by that individual or community at that time. Reality and truth are conceptually irreducible to each other, but they are not unrelated: in fact, they tend to converge.[16]

THE CHALLENGE REFINED

The thesis that the existence of truth is conditional upon the existence of cognisant beings does not necessarily take the form of the claim that what particular truths there are depends upon the contingencies of human existence. It can mean something much stronger: for instance, it can mean that, provided that there are cognisant beings who may say or think so, it is true that the number of planets in the solar system is greater than five,

independent of whatever humans say or believe about it. It still would be true that the number of planets in the solar system is greater than five, if all humans believed it to be false, or if there were no humans at all, but only other thinking beings. However, the argument goes, it would not be true that the number of planets in the solar system is greater than five, if no cognisant being (had ever) existed. So, even if it is conceded that what particular statements are true is independent of any contingent matter regarding human beings, it is maintained that whether or not there are true propositions at all is not independent of the existence of thinking beings.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE POINT

The distinction between the negation of the claim that reality causally or representationally depends upon human thought or language and the claim that truth does is relevant to the realism/antirealism debate. In fact, it could offer a theoretical *escamotage* to reintroduce robustly antirealist attitudes into apparently realist (or quietist) scenarios.

To appreciate this point, we ought to remember once more that the most influential antirealist positions in contemporary philosophy are post-Nietzschean in spirit, and that Nietzsche addressed his most famous critiques of traditional and modern philosophy against the notion of truth. Most antirealist philosophy is rooted in modern distinctions between a (possibly inaccessible) reality as it is in itself and a domain of phenomena accessible to human experience. Kant, who produced one of the canonical versions of this conception, claimed that things as they are in themselves are only thinkable but not objects of genuine knowledge, and that truth is a relationship of correspondence between knowledge and its objects, but "objects" are things as phenomenally experienced by subjects and not things themselves:

> [S]ince the object is outside me, the cognition in me, all I can ever pass judgement on is whether my cognition of the object agrees with my cognition of the object. The ancients called such a circle in explanation a *diallelon*.
>
> (Kant 1800, Eng. tr. 557–558)

Both antirealism with respect to truth and various forms of truth-relativism converge with antirealism proper in denying that there is or could be anything holding good of reality, were it not for the existence of human language, experience, or practices. There might be a thought-independent reality, it is admitted; however, it is claimed, the existence of truth depends upon human thought and language. Not only the existence of truths about humans, thoughts, actions, and languages but the very existence of truth as such. Realism is not only a vindication of the

existence of reality; it is also (or it can be) a vindication of the openness of human thought, experience, perception, and language to it.

IS THE RELATIVITY OF TRUTH TRIVIAL AFTER ALL?

The point is in fact more complicated than it looks: it may appear obvious that if truth is a property of statements, then the existence of truths and of the relative facts is a contingent matter, which depends upon the existence of human beings, or that, since statements are made in thoroughly human languages, what they express (hence, what is true, if they are true) depends upon thoroughly contingent (linguistic, social, cultural) conventions, too.

However, it is far from uncontroversial that truth is a property of utterances and psychological states of individuals—and not, say, of less obviously concrete entities such as propositions and Fregean thoughts (Frege 1918). Nor is it trivial that statements and beliefs are concrete entities, whose existence necessarily depends upon the existence of humans that utter or entertain them. It is in fact intuitive that different concrete human beings can have the same thoughts or make the same statements, or that the same human can do so at different times. Hence, it is far from obvious that truths are properties of concrete physical utterances of sounds or of concrete psychological (or neurophysiological) states, or that we can make no sense at all of their being what they are except in thoroughly contingent (psychological, linguistic, conventional) terms. It is, therefore, far from obvious that the existence of truths depends upon the existence of human beings. It is also far from obvious that, if no statements had ever been made and no thoughts thought by any being whatsoever, the true statements and thoughts we are considering (e.g. that Mt. Everest is higher than Mt. Blanc) would not be true for the simple fact that they would not be said or thought. If humans had never existed, it seems that that the height of Mt. Everest and the height of Mt. Blanc would not be as they are, now. Would it then not be true that Mt. Everest is higher than Mt. Blanc?

A DANGEROUS PATTERN

As with reality, also with respect to the purported relativity of truth, a similar recursive pattern may apply. If the existence of truth is relative to human beings, then:

- if humans did not exist, it would not be true that Mt. Everest is higher than Mt. Blanc;
    - for example, that Mt. Everest is higher than Mt. Blanc is true because there are human beings;
    - the relevant fact is relative to human interests;

- before humans existed, it was not true that Mt. Everest was higher than Mt. Blanc;
    - that Mt. Everest is higher than Mt. Blanc became true when humans appeared;
    - the relevant fact began to hold good of Mt. Everest and Mt. Blanc when they were measured by humans and is relative to such measurements;
- (possibly) it is not true that, before humans existed, Mt. Everest (already) was higher than Mt. Blanc;[17]
    - the truth of the statement that Mt. Everest is higher than Mt. Blanc does not predate the appearance of humans;
    - the fact that Mt. Everest is higher than Mt. Blanc does not predate human measurements, so it is not true to say now that in 500,000 BCE Mt. Everest was already higher than Mt. Blanc;
- that Mt. Everest is higher than Mt. Blanc is true now only relative to the existence of human beings, but not *simpliciter*;
    - strictly speaking, that Mt. Everest is higher than Mt. Blanc is only a condition relative to human interests and measurements, even if we cannot make any sense of Mt. Everest not being higher than Mt. Blanc;
    - the relevant facts hold good of Mt. Everest and Mt. Blanc only as features of human discourses and within their boundaries.

Notice that that same pattern applies to the very sentences appearing first: for example, if humans did not exist, well . . . it would not be true that humans do not exist; before humans existed, it was not true that humans did not exist at that time; it is not true now that, before humans existed, humans did not exist; that humans exist, now, is true, now, only relative to human beings, not *simpliciter*.

SUMMARISING

How should reality without truth be conceived of? A minimalist approach to the issue would be to say that, if there were no truth, things still would be exactly as they are, but it would not be true that they are the way they are. A gloss on this modest version is to add that neither would it be false that they are as they are. A stronger version could be that, if there were no truth, all facts would disappear: that if it were not true that Mt. Everest is higher than Mt. Blanc, there would be no fact that it is, and all features ascribed by true statements to Mt. Everest and Mt. Blanc would vanish: so there would be nothing in the world corresponding to the components of true statements: no objects, kinds, properties, facts, relations, magnitudes, quantities, sets, classes, and so forth. That is the world Rorty (1998) talks about, when he claims that "before you describe [something] as a

dinosaur, or as anything else, there is no sense to the claim that it is 'out there' having properties"; "there is no description-independent way the world is" (87).

Such "bare" reality has been imagined by some defendants of the thesis that all that appears in true statements is a sort of human projection of thoroughly contextual predicates and conditions upon an untamable reality, a reality beyond all of human thought and perception, a naked reality, as was perhaps imagined by Kant or, more probably, by Nietzsche. However, such an effort of the imagination might not be necessary, because, when it is said of something that it is or was a *t-rex*, what is actually claimed is simply that it was such that the conditions mentioned by the predicate "*t-rex*" were satisfied by it. And when it is said that Mt. Everest is higher than Mt. Blanc, what is said may be simply that the two entities mentioned in the sentence are such that they satisfy the condition mentioned in the sentence. The discussion of the different arguments for the linguistic relativity of facts displays, we believe, that they rely upon controversial assumptions, and that they are inconclusive at best.

4.4 Perspectival Reduction and Its Dangers

After considering different aspects of postmodernist antirealism and of the attitudes that fuelled it in some of its most popular versions, it is time to have a look at a spectrum of theoretical possibilities in which postmodernist antirealism is located and to put it in perspective.

THE SPECTRUM

Where does antirealism stand with respect to possible theoretical alternatives? And what are the most viable theoretical alternatives to it? The various postmodernist theses discussed so far position themselves towards one end of a broad philosophical spectrum of more or less radically reductionist options. A philosophical position is usually considered to be reductionist, with respect to a certain domain, if it reduces the entities in that domain to entities in another domain: in more technical terms, if it attempts to paraphrase all statements containing predicates of a certain kind into statements not containing them. That spectrum ranges from radically conservative (or anti-reductionist) positions on one side to radically reductionist ones on the other.

Radically conservative or anti-reductionist positions tend to ascribe reality or independent existence to virtually all sorts of entities featuring in the different fields of experience or discourse; from a technical point of view, they tend to insist that statements containing predicates of a certain kind cannot be paraphrased as statements not containing them without significant loss of content, meaning, or even generalisation. Conservative positions also tend to insist upon the distinction between what certain

entities are as such and the particular ways in which they may be experienced and talked about. Radically reductionist positions, on the other hand, tend to claim that certain kinds of entities "are nothing but" other kinds of entities, and that all talk about such entities is really nothing but talk about other kinds of entities, hence that all statements containing predicates of a certain kind can be paraphrased as statements not containing them, or containing only predicates of another kind.

Radically reductionist positions of the sort favoured by postmodernist philosophers are perspectivally reductionist, that is, they tend to reduce the properties or the very existence of various sorts of entities to aspects of the perspectives or frameworks in which they most typically feature. In slightly more technical terms, they tend to propose a paraphrase of statements containing certain kinds of predicates as statements in which such predicates are substituted by perspectival predicates, that is, by predicates expressing the way in which something is considered by someone (the maker of such statements, the relevant group of people, a certain institution, or the like).

For instance, a perspectival reductionist with respect to artworks would be someone who claims that being an artwork is being considered in a certain way by the relevant groups of persons (art managers, collectors, critics, inventories, laws), such that "The David of Donatello is an artwork" could be paraphrased as "The David of Donatello is considered in such and such a way by the relevant groups of persons", and that "The tea cup on my desk is not an artwork" could be paraphrased as the negation that the relevant groups of people consider it in that same way.

Perspectivally reductionist programmes tend to deny that certain—indeed, any—entities can exist or be what they are independently of their being experienced or talked about in certain typical ways: for instance, they tend to deny that there could be some intrinsic feature that all and only artworks share and that makes them all artworks, independently of whether they are considered as such by the relevant groups of people.

That specific type of reductionism is perspectival, because it traces the emergence of the features it discusses back to a particular perspective (of a perceiver, a speaker, an agent, or groups thereof). For instance, a perspectivally reductionist position with respect to the existence of money is one that reduces the existence of money to the existence of the relevant attitudes and beliefs in humans. If humans became extinct and banknotes and coins survived, such banknotes and coins would cease to be money, because (for a perspectival reductionist) being money is being considered and used as such by the relevant groups of agents. If, by some cosmic coincidence, there is somewhere in the universe an object which is identical to, and indiscernible from, the 5€ note that I have in my wallet, that object faraway in the universe is not money, because it is not regarded as such. Conversely, perspectival reductionism may claim that, if humans started trading goods and services using toothpicks in systematic ways,

those toothpicks would thereby become money, simply by being regarded and treated as such by the relevant groups of agents.

Similar patterns apply to linguistic signs: that the sign 'r' is a letter of the Latin alphabet depends on its being (and having systematically been) so employed by the relevant groups of persons. That the letter 'C' in classical Latin is a grapheme corresponding to the phoneme [*k*] depends on the relevant attitudes of classical Latin speakers and writers and not on its shape.

Perspectival reductionism can be distinguished from other forms of reductionism, because it insists upon the constitutive role of perspectives for the existence of the relevant features of reality, whereas other forms of reductionism typically do not take that step. Perspectival reductionism of all sorts is the claim that existing is as such being experienced or talked about, and that being something of a certain kind is being talked about or experienced in a certain kind of way.

Somewhere in between the two extreme positions of radical conservative antireductionism and radical reductionism, there are a number of philosophical theses that acknowledge the independent existence of certain entities, or rather of certain kinds of entities, while challenging the idea that other kinds of entities or features thereof may exist independently of the relevant patterns of human experience and discourse.

The particular kind of perspectival reductionism in action may vary from case to case: from correlationism—the thesis that "reality" is but a non-independent correlate of human experience, and that no reality can be conceived of independently of the particular modes in which it is experienced; to constructionism—the thesis that all reality is constructed, for example, socially constructed, and is nothing but the projection or reification of linguistic or social patterns.

PERSPECTIVAL REDUCTIONISM AND ONTOLOGY

Once the main attitude of postmodernist philosophy is in focus, it becomes clear that Postmodernism cannot be content with any form of realism, however moderate, be it general or local. All reality and all truth must be reduced or contextualised, that is, brought back to the fields of experience or discourse in which they typically feature and be proclaimed a mere expression or construction thereof. Any partial solution counts as intrinsically unsatisfactory.

The most common forms of perspectival reductionism relate to social properties or conventional properties, or social entities, events, and states of affairs. Instances of local perspectival reductionism are the following:

- common knowledge: in order that contracts exist, some cognisant beings must take something (sounds, signs on paper, or the like) as committing certain people in certain ways;

- perspectival reduction: being a contract is simply being taken as committing people in certain ways;
- CK: in order that marriages exist, certain types of sounds, or signs on paper, possibly uttered in certain circumstances or inscribed in certain typical documents must be taken by certain cognisant beings as instituting certain kinds of mutual obligations amongst certain people;
- PR: being married is simply being taken as bound by certain socially instituted mutual obligations;
- CK: in order that money exists, certain pieces of paper, metal, or the like must be taken by the relevant cognisant beings as entitling their owners to certain social transactions;
- PR: being money is simply being taken and used as a certain trading unit;
- CK: in order that property exists, certain relations between humans and other beings must be taken as prompting certain kinds of behaviour and excluding others;
- PR: being someone's property is simply being taken as having certain more or less exclusive relation to a certain individual or group.

Businesses, states, prices, credits, but also inflation rates, work and unemployment, debts, shares, and so forth are considered by many as depending for their very existence upon the relevant persons adopting certain perspectives, and not upon some kind of intrinsic feature or property, independent of the particular perspective that someone may have. It could be said that, for contemporary local perspectival reductionism, the Protagorean thesis counts: "All that appears to humans also exists, what appears to no human being, is nothing" (Sprague 2001: Sext Pyrrh, h. 1, 219).

Other forms of perspectival reductionism regard axiological and moral entities, properties, and states of affairs, as well as practical ones: for instance, an apple being good, a statue being beautiful or perfect, a tool being valuable or useless, a gesture being kind or cruel, but also a deal being fair or unfair, a strategy being collaborative or competitive, a negotiation being tough or soft, a proposal being honest or tricky, an advertisement being mischievous or politically correct, and so forth.

It all depends on perspectives, perhaps not on the particular perspective taken by a single person but at least on there being that kind of perspective (evaluations, interests, thoughts, perceptions, and the like). So, that the paper in my wallet is a 5€ note might not depend upon what I think of it or take it to be, but it does depend, it is claimed, upon the fact that there are persons and organisations, in the society in which I live, that currently consider such a piece of paper to be a 5€ note. That money is valuable might not depend upon whether or not I personally value money, but it seems to depend upon whether people, at large, value it. Whether or not the sentence "I didn't say nothing" is grammatically correct may

not depend upon whether its occasional utterers or their hearers consider it to be, but it seems to depend upon how the relevant speakers or hearers generally are prepared to consider it.

More radical forms of perspectival reductionism have been extended to other kinds of entities and properties, states and events, which were traditionally considered as biologically, physically, or physiologically underpinned: for example, being an illness, and especially a mental illness, being a family, being a male, being homosexual, being in love, being young, being a nation. The very existence of such entities as family, illness, homosexuality, love, ethnicity, and many others has been interpreted at one point or another as structurally relative to a (typically social) perspective (cf. Hacking 1999 for an impressively large catalogue).

Even more radical forms of perspectival reductionism have infiltrated into apparently more rigid domains, such as sense perception and the natural sciences. For instance, sensory properties have been reduced to their being perceived, but also the most general entities featuring in scientific descriptions have been considered by some as description- or language-relative. That strategy has been applied to virtually all scientific disciplines, all the way down to biology, chemistry, and physics, with their cells, molecules, and subatomic particles, and to mathematics and logic, with their ideal entities and abstract laws.

It may be *prima facie* plausible to accept that a mountain being in Switzerland is something in some way related to, and dependent upon, what people consider as Switzerland, the Swiss territory, Swiss borders, and the like (including how they interpret a number of documents, such as treaties, maps, etc.). And that banknotes and coins would cease to be money if everyone stopped treating them as such. And indeed, it seems that USD1 being worth EUR 0.842 depends upon a relevant number of people being ready to trade dollars for euros based on that rate or one close enough to it. And it seems that a Stellantis share being worth USD16.86 depends upon the relevant people considering it to be worth that amount of money or a structurally related amount.

THE TRADITIONAL DEFENCE AGAINST PERSPECTIVAL REDUCTIONISM

The traditional realist or conservative defence against Postmodernism as radical perspectival reductionism was the thesis that, at least for some domains of discourse, it is impossible to completely reduce such domains, with the entities featuring in them and the properties ascribed to them, to the particular and contingent perspectives of the relevant persons: that there are at least some non-completely mind-dependent entities (Searle 1995 refers to mountains; Boghossian 2006 to giraffes; Meillassoux 2006 to entities predating the appearance of life on earth). The traditional response in a way accepts the challenge of perspectival reductionism

but denies that it can be applied without restrictions. The natural sciences are often (but not always) cited by traditional opponents of radical perspectival reductionism as a bedrock of non-perspectival reality. Not everything the sciences talk about depends upon the way it is talked about for its being what it is. In their search for the pristinely non-perspectival, traditional responses often tend to concede the perspectival status of many domains, such as social entities, conventional ones, institutional ones, and the like. All they insist upon is that not everything is perspectival, so that there is some kind of reality which is there and is what it is independently of being experienced, talked about, or considered as such. Such attempts tend to focus upon a residual non-reducible reality.

It should be noticed that, if management practice and research is to expect to receive a significant theoretical contribution from realist philosophy, it is unlikely that such a contribution will come from the sole upholding of the existence of a residual irreducible natural or physical reality. If the perspectival reductionism adopted by postmodernist antirealism is right about the whole domain of social reality, then, it could be argued, it is right enough as far as all the social sciences are concerned: if being a business, a manager, a brand, a consumer, a profit, a product, a price, an advertisement, a credit, a discount, a patent, a contract, a segment, a sale, is a matter of being considered as such, then realism might be good for physicists and biologists, but Postmodernism would seem to be fine for managers, as well as for sociologists, economists, and perhaps for historians too.

4.5 Non-Epistemological Ontology

In the face of the perspectival reductionist attitude, which reduces all being-so to being so-experienced or so-talked-about by humans, the traditional defence of anti-postmodernist thinkers was to claim that there exists some kind of pristine reality, a reality which is completely mind-independent. Such reality, though, is the least interesting for the social sciences and for management and marketing in particular. Therefore, realist philosophy ought to do more than reassure humans that some non-human reality exists. It ought to make sense of the idea that not everything which is experienced by humans or which is part of their lives is socially constructed or perspective-relative phantasmagory.

Realist philosophy in the social sciences ought to attempt to make sense of the robustness of the social world, of the not merely perspectival relevance of such things as money, a dominant market position, an effective distribution network, an innovative advertising campaign, but also a fair institutional reform, a successful merger, an attractive brand identity. It might be reasonable for humans to be afraid of ontologically mind-independent things, such as bears, wolves, and volcanic eruptions, but it seems to be as reasonable for them to attempt to avoid less ontologically

mind-independent calamities, such as share value drops, badly negative account balances, commercial swindles, bankruptcy, poor corporate reputation, non-performing loans. It does not seem to help, when faced with a payment injunction, to attempt to persuade oneself that something is a debt only if it is regarded as such by someone, or that the very existence of debts is a mere social convention.

If all there really is, independently of any perspective, are perhaps palaeontological remains and faraway galaxies, why is it that so many human beings, individually and in organised groups, struggle to obtain such purportedly perspective-relative things as acknowledgement, justice, rights, incomes, profits, respectability, position, status, and the like? If our happiness depends so heavily upon such thought-relative things, why don't we all change our lives by stipulating that we all are rich, respectable, and successful?

THE REALIST'S ESCAPIST TEMPTATION

Typically, to make their point, realist philosophers make reference to palaeontological scenarios, to the orbits of planets, or to physical subparticles or chemical reactions, contexts in which little or no suspicion of human-relatedness could arise:

> [S]ome facts are clearly description-dependent, or mind-dependent. . . . Nothing could be money, and no one could be a *priest* or a *president*, unless someone is—or at some point was—prepared to so describe them. . . . But whatever one thinks about any particular case, the point is that it does not seem to be a *necessary truth* about *all* facts that they are in this way description—or mind—dependent. For example, facts about mountains, dinosaurs or electrons seem not to be description-dependent. Why should we think otherwise?
>
> (Boghossian 2006, 28, emphasis in the original)

However, such defences concede so much to perspectival reductionism that what they save from its grip seems little, perhaps too little: once we have assumed that any form of mind-relatedness or even human-relatedness casts a shadow of doubt upon the full ontological robustness of an entity or of an entire domain, we are already held hostage to an antirealist picture and we have no choice other than to give up domain after domain (conventions, social entities, norms, habits, languages, perhaps even thoughts), until what we are left with are the bare bones of nature . . . only to discover that, well, strictly speaking, "the 'primary qualities' of physics are not a set of 'properties' that we have discovered things to have, but a set of *idealized abstractions*" (Putnam 1999, 24, emphasis in the original).[18] Also what we consider as existing out there independently of human mind or experience is itself a human (scientific) construction:

hence, by our own standards, it ought to be stripped away from a rigorous model of reality. From the more intuitively plausible thesis that social properties are relative to particular perspectives, we find ourselves drawn to radically perspectival reductionist positions.

Further, by the same principle, even *Tyrannosaurus rex* did not simply exist "out there", because what we call '*t-rex*' is actually a scientific abstraction from an evolutionary continuum featuring different organisms, bearing resemblances to each other, but variously diverging in a number of ways from what palaeontologists have come to hypothesise and model as the species *t-rex*. If the basic tenet of perspectival reductionism is accepted, it will hunt down its opponents no matter where they hide: common sense, basic physics, pure mathematics. The issue of non-total mind independence always can be raised and with some right at that.

WHERE THE ESCAPIST TEMPTATION COMES FROM

What is the basic tenet of perspectival reductionism, the thesis that, once accepted, makes every realist approach fragile as a consequence? There are many such precepts, but perhaps the pivotal one is a conflation of epistemological and ontological aspects of philosophical problems (Searle 1995; Ferraris 2009, § 2, 2012, Eng. tr. 31).

Perspectival reductionists—like all sorts of postmodernist philosophers, and some philosophers trying to defend realism—tend to equate the legitimate epistemological doubt that we can make sense of any notion while completely disregarding its featuring in some structured discourse, with the *toto coelo* different issue of whether entities referred to in such discourses are themselves context- or discourse-relative. There is a big difference between saying that we cannot make sense of volcanic eruptions without reference to some geological framework (or to frameworks of some other kind, say, religious frameworks, in which eruptions may be caused by the wrath of some deity) and saying that volcanic eruptions themselves only take place relative to some geological framework.

Once the illegitimate conflation of epistemology and ontology has been accepted as a common assumption, realist philosophers desperately look for phenomena or features of reality whose existence is so platitudinous that it repugns common sense and intellectual decency to interpret them as existing only relative to human experience or discourse: for example, paleontological scenarios, faraway galaxies, physical sub-particles, and the like. But it is these realist philosophers who are on the run, with perspectival reductionists chasing them.

A DISTINCTION

Let us look at a couple of examples to clarify our point. Consider the paleontological question: "Do *t-rex* really exist?" That question can be

answered in a straightforward way: "Yes, they do", or "they did". The existence of *t-rex* did not depend upon the existence of human minds or thoughts, or kinds of discourse. Their adventure began and came to a halt before there were humans on this planet. One may ask, though, whether the existence of *t-rex* does not ultimately depend upon the coordinates of the paleontological discourse and discipline, for example, upon certain accepted generalisations regarding species which evolved over time and displayed a significant set of genetic variations and deviations.

Epistemologically speaking, doesn't the existence of *t-rex* in some way depend upon the adoption of certain canons of discourse, of certain generalisations, idealisations, abstractions, etc.? Well, epistemologically speaking, it may, in some way, but that does not change the fact that the individuals to which the palaeontological expression '*Tyrannosaurus rex*' refers were free to exist and to go about their business long before any human set foot upon this planet. Epistemological dependence of certain notions upon a network of concepts, assumptions, background theories, generalisations, and the like is not ontological dependence of the beings themselves, referred to by those notions, upon those very same epistemological features.

WHY BE SHY?

Now, many realist philosophers may feel shy when they are called upon to apply a similar pattern of argument to the world inhabited by human beings and to so-called human reality. They do so precisely because they had resorted to dinosaurs and faraway galaxies in order to escape the puzzlement of perspectival reductionism which emerges from the conflation between ontological dependence and mere epistemological dependence. They were puzzled also because they might have yielded to a second concession—to equate mind-relatedness with perspective-relativity, that is, to equate the following claims:

i. the correct claim that many things would not exist if thinking beings did not exist;
ii. the completely different claim that whatever would not exist if no thinking being existed, only exists perspectivally, that is, relative to those beings—or in their minds, if you prefer.

Take (i.): it makes perfect sense to say that there would have been no airplanes if there had not been thinking beings to design and construct them. Another thing altogether is to claim (ii.), that airplanes exist only in a perspectival sense, that is, relative to thinking beings: that they are not out there in the sky. Manufactured things would not exist if there were no thinking beings, because it takes intelligent design and skill for such things to come about. Hence, they are causally mind-dependent

or thought-dependent (or design-dependent). Dams would not exist if humans (and beavers!) did not build them. But they are out there, and they do channel water.

Indirect, unintended, overlooked, or underestimated consequences of design and innovation, such as demographic explosion, pollution, and extinction of certain species, depend upon the existence of thinking beings, too, but they are not relative to their perspectives. In fact, thinking beings are unaware of most of the real consequences of their actions. For instance, the invention and implementation of efficient food supply techniques, safe and healthy shelter, and effective medical treatments have contributed to the human demographic explosion during the past centuries. That explosion is causally mind-dependent in the platitudinous sense that it would not have taken place if humans had had much lower mental capacities, or different mental capacities, or even if they had used such mental capacities very differently, or if social institutions favouring certain uses of mental capacities had not been established and supported. Effective food supply systems, safe and healthy dwellings, and medical treatments were not designed to promote demographic growth, so demographic growth is an indirect ontological consequence of certain forms of intelligence. Yet, it is out there, just as much as food, dwellings, and medical treatments are.

The Rilke Trail is located in the Gulf of Trieste in North-Eastern Italy, and it is currently a tourist attraction, mentioned and reviewed in guidebooks, blogs, and phone applications. The original path may have been traced by the repeated passage of humans, or of humans with some kind of livestock, or by the simple repeated passage of non-domesticated animals. It is typically associated with the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, who titled a famous collection of his poems *Duinse Elegien*, since most of them were inspired by his stay at the Duino castle, which is right at the beginning of the current Rilke Trail. Over time, the trail was not used any more, so it fell into a state of decay. In 1987, maintenance work was undertaken. Now the Rilke Trail is private property, left for public use for a symbolically low amount of money per year.

Does the Rilke Trail only exist from a certain human perspective and relative to it? That seems highly counter-intuitive. Take its location and size, for example: the Trail is 1.7 km long and has an average altitude above sea level of ninety metres. These are perfectly respectable spatio-temporal coordinates, for a concrete object. From an epistemological point of view, many questions could be raised, as to whether a certain thing may be considered as a proper path or trail, whether the Rilke Trail bears enough resemblances to a paradigm type of trail, or whether a tourist trail and a simple shepherd trail are the same type of object. But the ontological question seems to be different: is there such a thing as the Rilke Trail out there? The existence of trails is related, at least in some standard cases, to the existence of minded life, for example, to the

faculty that certain animals (including humans) have of moving about in ordered and intentional ways: perceiving, discriminating shapes and patterns, orienteering, following and leading, and the like. But that does not seem to make our Trail any more perspective-relative than the rocks and the trees beside it.

One may be tempted to suggest that the Trail is perspective-dependent, because it is a path, it exists as a trail only for humans and as a part of human conventions. But that seems, at the very least, debatable: other living beings, domesticated or not, tend to create paths in the bush and through fields, and to follow them. And it is not unusual that humans use the same paths first created by the repeated passage of non-domesticated animals, or the other way around. The existence of paths may raise epistemological issues and thus be, like anything else, to some degree, epistemologically speaking, relative to some framework. Nonetheless, the Rilke Trail is right there, in the bush and through the rocks. And its existence explains why certain ontologically mind-independent events happen or do not happen in it, for example, why certain plants do not grow in it: because, being a trail, it is regularly trodden by animals, and being trodden on crushes most fragile things, like very young plants.

Paths in the bush, through fields, through vineyards, deserts, valleys, or mountains, may be marked by all sorts of human signals, indications, tourist information; they may appear in tourist guides, in smartphone applications, blogs, and online tourist attraction rating platforms; they may be marked by coefficients of difficulty for trekkers, climbers, families. They may or may not be filled with picnic tables, shelters, panoramic viewpoints. Hence, no doubt, paths are plainly part of human reality, too. They are there, for us. But they are not parts of only human reality, whatever that may mean: they are parts of reality *simpliciter*, just like the trees and the deserts around them. And it is also in this sense that they may become something further, and take up further properties, so to speak, for example, become tourist attractions, training areas for joggers, metaphors of human destiny for poets.

Take the Alps around Davos, if you like: the mountains are there and have not been produced by human activity, at least by and large. At some point, humans have started believing that the climate of the Alps benefits people with certain kinds of health conditions. Hotels and medical or semi-medical facilities were built in the area especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to host people prepared to pay for treatment in such a reportedly healthy climate; certain human beings with specific types of medical education (medical doctors) moved to that area, taking up positions in medical institutions and clinics. Infrastructures were built or reinforced, such as railways and roads. Even some of the most famous books in world literature made reference to the mountains, the hotels, and the daily routine in the Davos area.

Now, the notion of health is an excellent candidate for epistemological perspective-relativity (Canguilhem 1966; Hacking 1999). And the notion of tourism is epistemologically perspective-relative too. And even the notions of treatment, medicine, doctor, are all epistemologically perspective-relative. But that does not make tourism or health or doctors or treatments any more perspective-relative than mountains and deer.

We need no special philosophical theory to be aware that medical tourism typically produces certain effects, which range from infrastructures to architecture, engineering, insurance, banking, real estate price variations, business, entertainment, and advertising. It makes perfect sense to say that tourism would not have developed the way it did, in the Davos area, had it not been for particularly widespread beliefs and perspectives in European cultures, including medical beliefs and beliefs about climate. But that does not make tourism, and medical tourism, any less a part of reality. The Davos railway station, the roads, sewage systems, bus stops, hotel beds, heating systems, swimming pools, restaurants with their tables and menus and fridges, the cars and cinemas are simply there, as well as the medical doctors, architects, interior designers, and tax advisors. All these things are in Davos, just like the mountains and clouds are: and the economic transactions between humans, making it profitable to set up certain kinds of businesses are there, too.

That a trail or a certain piece of land are public areas or private properties does change something about them, especially if you consider that the owner of that piece of land may decide to build a resort on it, thereby chopping down trees, creating a swimming pool, and the like. And a certain authority may decide to introduce a fee for those who want to walk a certain trail: the fee may be considered as a merely conventional and perspective-relative object, but it should not: as we know from debates about mass tourism in art cities, there is a very real correlation between there being a certain fee to access a certain place (or to travel to a certain destination) and the number of human beings physically accessing it. And that has another plethora of fully real effects, from the tons of litter to be taken away, to the presence of toilets and restaurants, etc.

One last example: consider the price of buildable land in a certain area, say, in Davos, or in Cortina d'Ampezzo, St. Moritz, or Cannes, as opposed to that in some place with no tourism at all. One may say that what is really there is only the land and, afterwards, the built house, that all the rest is mere convention. But if you consider the matter closely, you may realise that the size of the house, its shape, the number of floors, the material it is made up of, the size of its windows and doors, the height of its ceilings, the type of roof, the shape and material of pipes and wires, etc., largely depend upon effective conventions, such as regulations, prohibiting the building of houses in certain areas, or larger than certain sizes, or in an energy class that is lower than a certain standard, and so forth. Taste could be an equally effective factor: colour, material, size, shape,

design, style, inner structure, furniture, all depend upon human habits and conventions. Even the functional split up into rooms mirrors social habits and conventions. The price of buildable land does influence reality, and physical reality, too. For instance, if someone puts a buildable piece of land on the market for a price that is ten times its current market value, it is extremely unlikely that a house will be built upon that piece of land for a while. In a nutshell, mind-dependence of a certain thing does not make it mind-relative. There is no need for the realist to seek shelter in faraway galaxies or in sub-particles to find a robust reality.

MIND-RELATEDNESS VERSUS PERSPECTIVE-RELATIVITY

If trails and tourism do not convince you, take rubbish dumps: if there were no cognisant beings, and no humans in particular, there would be no dumps. And, epistemologically speaking, one could make a point that there is no rigid set of necessary and sufficient conditions satisfied by all and only the things which are categorised as dumps in contemporary urban and environmental planning. But dumps seem to be quite ontologically perspective-independent.

If dumps still are not enough for you, think of pollution: causally speaking, most pollution is mind-related, in the banal sense that it is produced by beings that think (at least some of the time). If there were no thinking beings, most of the phenomena referred to as pollution or even climate change would not be there or would be significantly different. And that seems to be quite a commonplace. Still, a myriad of legitimate points can be made, from a broadly speaking epistemological point of view, about the perspective-relativity of the notion of pollution, for example, regarding the various possible concepts thereof, their historical origins, their social backgrounds, their dependence upon, or solidarity with, social norms and practices, for example, the interpretation of what is dirty, what is contamination, and so forth (Li and Svarverud 2018). One could even venture to claim that pollution, and even climate change, epistemologically speaking, are socially constructed Pettenger (2007), in the sense that, just like for any other notions, climate change can only be made sense of against the background of certain concepts, assumptions, practices, and of the relative institutions (cf. the opening anecdote of Latour [2012]). But, although epistemologically stimulating or even illuminating, we presume that such an attitude would be too happy-go-lucky if taken as an ontological statement. To sum up:

- the claim that the existence of pollution is ontologically mind-related makes perfect sense, if understood as having a causal meaning: if there were no thinking beings (e.g. no humans) there would be much less pollution (in the commonplace sense that there would be no cars, factories, dumps, waste-disposal facilities, etc.);

- the claim that, epistemologically speaking, the (different) notions and conceptions of pollution are perspective-relative sounds acceptable, in the ordinary sense that different populations at different times have or have had different conceptions of pollution, depending upon a number of social, religious, scientific, technical, institutional, or cosmological backgrounds;
- however, as our fellow animal inhabitants of this planet are experiencing even more than we humans are, although pollution is epistemologically perspective-relative and causally mind-dependent, it is perfectly real and unfortunately ontologically not perspective-relative at all.

The fact that postmodernist-sounding ideas about the social construction of reality have recently been adopted, in somewhat popularised ways, to claim that climate change or rising ocean levels may be nothing but constructions or inventions or in some sense conventional entities, ought to sharpen our attention towards the distinction between real causal dependence, epistemological perspective-relativity and purported ontological perspective-relativity, which seems to be another thing altogether:

> In the face of the looming ecological catastrophe, and the increasing infiltration of technology into the everyday world (including our own bodies), it is not clear that the anti-realist position is equipped to face up to these developments. The danger is that the dominant anti-realist strain of continental philosophy has not only reached a point of decreasing returns, but that it now actively limits the capacities of philosophy in our time.
>
> (Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman 2011b, 3)

A similar example could be made about bridges: a tree fallen across the two sides of a river or precipice is ontologically speaking as real as anything could wish to be. It is out there, whether seen or unseen, trodden or not. It is also there for humans to cross but also for wolves chasing humans or for deer, mice, and any other animals wishing to cross. And animals need not be shown how to use a natural crossing or bridge in order to use it. The natural crossing or bridge seems to be out there.

What about manufactured bridges? Do they also exist out there? If humans chop down a tree and lay it across the two sides of the river, they thereby create a bridge, or at least they so do if they use it that way. However, once the bridge is created, no matter whether it is a simple chopped tree or an exercise in sophisticated engineering, it seems that it is out there as much as a natural bridge: it is in the world whether seen or not, trodden or not, and can be crossed by humans or other animals, whether domesticated or not (e.g. by bears or wolves), can be colonised by plants, can become a shelter from rain, and so forth. Bridges may be

operated by private firms or public authorities, they may be crossed for free or with a toll, they may become symbols of a city or even of a country, they may be tourist attractions (the Golden Gate, the Brooklyn Bridge, the Sighs Bridge), World Heritage Properties (the Forth bridge, the Malabadi bridge, the Mostar bridge), or mere infrastructures.

If you believe that these examples make sense only because they refer to material or physical (biological, architectural, ecological) consequences of conventions and institutions, you ought to consider the unintended, overlooked, underestimated, or ignored, but utterly real effects of cultural prejudice, social discrimination, political incompetence, or managerial inexperience. Inflation—and its consequences—existed long before there was a notion of inflation or an understanding of its causes. The causes of an economic crisis may be as difficult to grasp as the ones of a natural calamity, and the (social, political, cultural) consequences of an economic crisis are certainly irreducible to narratives about it.

A typical aspect of reality is its exceeding purpose, any purpose. Reality's simply being what it is is not a limitation, but rather a sign of fecundity. A bridge becomes a shelter for the homeless, then perhaps a den for other living beings, or a tourist attraction, or a military target. Reality exceeds definition, capture, function.

THE FECUNDITY OF THE DISTINCTION

Can the distinction between epistemological perspective-relativity and possible causal-relativity always be drawn? New Realist philosophers may strike us as surprisingly cautious with respect to this kind of generalisation. The most they demand is that the distinction be appreciated and thought about: realist philosophers tend to part company when it comes to the ontological assessment of specific domains. But that is precisely the point of New Realism—that the great theoretical *alibi* of universal perspective-relativity is rejected and that the ontological status of specific domains is thoroughly investigated and not subsumed as an eminent case of purportedly self-evident social construction.

To sum up, philosophers associated with New Realism reject the assumption that all reality (and a fortiori all social reality) is socially constructed. They tend to embrace an opposite perspective, from which reality is not, ontologically speaking, socially constructed as such: once we exclude the postmodernist postulate of universal social construction the specific ontological status of different domains emerges as worthy of investigation.

Take another, less intuitive, example: the existence of property. Is the existence of property perspective-relative? Does property exist out there in the world or is it a mere intra-conventional feature of so-called human reality? Now, it seems that the existence of property is causally dependent upon the existence of minded life, of beings capable of perceiving,

discriminating, recognising, orienting in space, but also protecting, defending, retrieving, and so forth. Or at least we cannot push our imagination to devise scenarios in which there could be property but no minds. But as we have seen, causal dependence upon the existence of minds is not the same as perspective-relativity. Let us assume that the existence of property is causally mind-related, that it takes minds to have property in the world. From an epistemological point of view, one can produce a genealogy of the different conceptions, legal formulations, religious derivations, and social connotations of property and show how, epistemologically speaking, when we talk about property, we are in fact dealing with an archipelago of anthropologically diverse practices, codes, norms, and the like. Viewed from that perspective, it might make little sense to talk about property *tout court* but only to talk about property in a certain historical, political, or legal framework (cf. Weaver 1999), such that the notion of property, epistemologically speaking, is perspective-relative. But what about the ontological status of property? Is something's being mine or yours, or the property of a firm or of a municipality or of an investment fund, a feature that that thing has, independently of particular perspectives? Is it something out there, just like dumps, trails, and bridges could be considered to be? Or does it only exist from a certain perspective, or in a certain mind-relative reality? Is property only in our minds?

If you are inclined to think that property is an entirely conventional thing and that it does not exist outside of human reality, think of the way in which many other animals mark and defend hunting territories, or behave with respect to dens—we would say *their* hunting territories and *their* dens, not to speak of other forms of belonging. Is a territory's being the hunting ground of a certain predator something only mind-relative? Relative to whose mind then? Certainly not to the human mind (except in the usual epistemological sense). Isn't the behaviour of animals a part of the real world? Aren't roles and other patterns emerging from groups of animals of the same species, or even of different species interacting with each-other, real? For sure, we cannot say that the territorial behaviour of predators or other animals depends upon human perspectives, in order to exist.

The point of these examples is not to settle the issue in realist terms, but rather to highlight a tendency to neglect significant real patterns, because of the habit of shying away from anything whose existence a radical perspectival-reductionist may feel tempted to challenge. Consider political debates about the legal status of freshwater, which some claim should remain as a common resource and never be privatised. Does the debate exclusively concern conventional features of water, features that do not concern it as a fluid made up of H_2O and located in certain amounts in certain places, or does it have an impact upon reality as such? We would say that water being common, public, or private causally changes the amount of fluid pumped everyday into houses and other facilities, its

velocity, the infrastructures used to transport it, the ways in which it can be accessed, the quantity of minerals in it (decided by public authorities or private companies), and so forth.

It is far from obvious that property exists only perspectivally and does not exist out there. Whatever the decision about the status of property may be, the question of what it ontologically takes for property to exist is a legitimate one and cannot be disposed of by making reference to the commonplace that there would be no property if there were no minds.

GENERALISING THE DISTINCTION: HEURISTICS

Similar lines of argument may be used to address the status of social roles, such as being a partner, a leader, a head of department, a board member, an owner, a customer, an associate, a consultant, a student, an employee, a slave, a married person, and so forth. What is particularly intriguing for contemporary ontology, though, is the rich landscape of domains whose existence seems to be anchored only feebly, if at all, in physical reality. In a world which expands more and more in intangible, non-material, or even virtual dimensions, the appeal of perspectival-reductionism does not increase, but rather decreases, as its only idea risks being the mantra that whatever entity we think we are dealing with, that purported entity is in fact socially constructed, an idea which does not help us sufficiently to differentiate between often delicate statuses and contexts (say, between mountains as tourist attractions, patented innovations, copyrighted property, virtual currencies).[19]

Take migration, if you like: the notions of migration and migrant have changed over the past centuries and one could think that there is a broad spectrum of different folk interpretations, legal definitions, and sociological frameworks to make sense of migration. Nonetheless, migration takes place out there in the real world, with people physically crossing borders, relocating in different areas of the earth-crust, and the like. We need not be reminded of the material barriers or infrastructures created to stop migration, deviate it, contain it, or assist it, as a completely real phenomenon. In that sense, human migrations are still migrations, like the ones of other living beings, not merely conventional ones: a group of persons is first in a place and, at a later stage, in another place.

Can something similar be said about money? What is money? What does it take in order for money to exist, or for something to be money? Again, it is not enough to claim that money is mind-dependent, because so, too, are ships, breeding farms, and wars (Condello, Ferraris, and Searle 2019). If we drop the theoretical association between being mind-related and being perspective-relative, and we keep the distinction between epistemological questions and causal/ontological questions in mind, we may discover a whole field of issues worthy of deep philosophical thinking, questions of importance for the social sciences too. For instance, take the

idea that something's being money actually depends upon its being treated as such. So, something is money if it is used as money. The first question would be: treated as such by whom? Take the 5€ in my pocket. Would it cease to be 5€ if I folded the note up to make a paper airplane? Or take a 10$ bill. Would it cease to be money if I framed it as a souvenir of a holiday I took in the USA? Or let us stay with my 5€ note. Would that same 5€ note become a 10€ note, if the greengrocer downstairs accepted it as payment for a 10€ bill? If something's being money entirely depends upon the way in which it is treated, how free are its users to have its value changed simply by changing the way they treat it? Can a sovereign debt be halved in a moment by changing the way people treat it? Is money still money at night, when everyone is asleep and no one thinks of it? Or does it continue to be money, because, well, there is always someone awake at night, thinking about money? Similar questions may be raised with respect to contracts, budgets, brands, credits, interest rates, loans, corporate identities, logos, financial assets, segments, patents, communities, nations.

A DIFFERENT SCENARIO

Far from being a settled issue, contemporary philosophical debates intensively investigate the status and structure of different kinds of entities, ranging from artefacts to institutions, to symbols, financial processes, and legal corpuses. If we look at the situation nowadays, we find it reversed with respect to the peak of postmodernist influence, in the 1980s and 1990s:

- the existence of some reality is not under such massive attack any more, so realist philosophers may be soon relieved of the task of digging up some pristine pre-human reality to satisfy their postmodernist opponents;
- realism has developed a concrete set of theoretical programmes aiming at the charting of reality in all its various domains and provinces, ranging from physical reality to chemical, biological, and psychological reality, to social, economic, political reality, legal reality, and so forth;
- a third aspect, which we have intentionally left in the background, is the return of objects as presentable ontological entities, worth investigating and reflecting upon, and even of a spreading consensus about their imprescindibility for the emergence of a concrete network of social relations.

4.6 Emergent Properties and Conventional Reality

We think it useful, at this point, to summarise the main theses emerging from the rich debate that has opposed recent realist philosophical positions to received postmodernist antirealist views:

4.6.1 The Main Points

- reality: many things just really exist, out there;
- indifference: not everything that exists is experienced, thought of, or talked about, by humans;
- independence: not everything that is experienced or talked about by humans exists only relative to them;
- Pygmalion-ness:[20] not all that owes its existence to humans exists only from a human perspective.
- Another point that emerges from the Realism/Postmodernism debate is a heightened attention to the distinction between epistemological questions and ontological questions.

4.6.2 Ontology and Epistemology in a Non-Kantian Scenario

Contemporary debates tend to distinguish sharply between what is known, believed, or thought about something, and what it in fact is. For instance, they tend to distinguish between what ancient Egyptians knew or believed about diseases and what diseases actually existed in their times. But the distinction does not stop there. It also extends to a more general and systematic domain. In contemporary ontologies, the distinction between thinking and being is extended to cover very general matters, such as the difference between belonging to a certain realm of reality and being experienced or conceived of in a certain way. Modern and late-modern philosophy tend to divide reality, in a Kantian vein, into domains or realms, correlated to the possible different fields of experience—or types of judgement. Post-Kantian ontologies, including most phenomenological ones, are in fact often derived from theories of judgement or from theories of experience. Contemporary realists, on the other hand, tend to carry out ontological investigations in a different fashion, that is, distinguishing the features of objects from the ways in which they are or could be experienced.

That apparently abstract point plays a potentially crucial role with respect to marketing, since the conflation of or correlation between the possible features of objects and their modes of experience tends to level out the incremental and exuberant character of reality as such, and of objects in particular, and to reduce what an object—for example, a product or even a brand—is to the way in which it is perceived or experienced, thereby concentrating marketing attention almost exclusively upon the subjective features of a possible experience thereof.

Believing that the different aspects, or fields, or realms, of reality are but correlates of possible aspects, fields, or realms of experience orients us to think that there is nothing about the objects themselves which is worth considering, that all significant aspects of an object can be found in the

way in which individuals or groups experience that object. That may lead to the further step of believing that objects themselves are nothing but bare concrete particulars waiting to be invested with meaning by individuals and groups. As we have seen, some of the most celebrated tendencies in contemporary marketing are prone to such an attitude: for instance, Experiential Marketing, Relationship Marketing (and even more Service Dominant Logic), and Consumer Culture Theory, all tend to underplay the relevance of objects and their intrinsic features. Coherently, they all tend to focus almost exclusively upon the subjective or individual experience of objects and situations, the role that objects receive in symbolic contexts and human relations or the way in which human beings exchange services and acknowledge the value of such services.

4.6.3 Beyond Artefacts

Besides the four aforementioned theses and the heightened sense of the distinction between ontological and epistemological problems, there are other more controversial or less intuitive positions about which realist philosophers not only part ways from the postmodernists but tend to do so even from each other. However, the variety of positions—ranging from strong conventionalism or even fictionalism to emergentism—has contributed to articulate and sophisticate the concrete analysis of social phenomena from a realist perspective and to produce a number of examples and case studies.

If Pygmalion-ness strikes you as a very strong thesis, it should be noted that all it claims is that plastic bags, tractors, and skyscrapers really exist, just like trees, rocks, and tides do. In fact, Pygmalion-ness is a rather weak thesis which can be confined to the existence of artefacts, that is, of concrete particulars, forged by humans, through craftsmanship, industrial production, design, and the like. Dikes really do stop or channel water, walls really do keep predators out, airplanes really take off and fly, and, well, sometimes container vessels block the Suez Canal for a while. That's perhaps part of the point of logistics: if you have merchandise shipped to another continent, it really should be there at the end of the process. However, Pygmalion-ness risks stopping at the threshold of conventional reality, leaving out the most challenging, fruitful, and uncanny aspects of its dynamics, that is, the ones that have inspired the boldest myths and speculations.

From time immemorial, human beings have speculated about the origins and status of social roles and institutions, and of their robustness, of norms and mores and their legitimacy, of covenants and laws and their coercing power, of value and money and their only apparent arbitrariness, and of course of languages and their capacity to be the medium of communication, as well as a possible barrier to it. We consider such entities social to a larger extent, or "strictly social", for brevity. By "strictly

social entities" we mean entities that depend not only upon the existence of intelligent life in order to exist but upon the existence of some stable form of habit or coordination.

Take a factory: the existence of warehouses, forklifts, desks, chairs, computers, and vending machines simply seems to be Pygmalionic, in that it was brought about by human design, but now it is out there in the world, just like clouds and birds. However, many philosophers would still be puzzled by the idea of accepting that the firm itself, its brand, its budget, its account balances, its outstanding credits and debts, its policies and strategies are also simply out there in the world.

Where do all these things come from? What is their status? What makes them so robust and even compelling? What preserves them and prevents them from decadence and disappearance? Why are some of them apparently ubiquitous (language, norms, roles), whereas others are local or late appearances (credit, money, state)? Social ontology faces the task of accounting for these apparently conflicting intuitions:

i. certain social entities seem to exist only in a perspective-relative sense. Not only are they causally dependent upon the existence of intelligent beings, like artefacts and Pygmalionic realities in general are: they seem to have no existence outside human conventions;
ii. certain strictly social entities appear to be as real as non-social entities and artefacts are. They are stubborn, compelling, recalcitrant, inter-subjectively recognisable, stable, connected with each other and with the rest of reality in mostly consistent ways, they are part of the environment with which intelligent individuals learn to cope as they mature.

Are entities that are social to a larger extent simply out there, just like mountains, clouds, and—yes—dikes, and aircrafts? There are countless myths about the origins of social institutions and hierarchies, of laws, of money and value, and of language. Unlike artefacts, which are mostly considered as concrete particulars, strictly social entities are apparently more elusive, although they play an enormous role in human reality, and in management, too.

4.6.4 More than Objects

Amongst social entities you can count not only social objects but also social properties and relations, as well as facts and events.

Costing 10€, being discounted, being advertised in a certain way, being a mainstream or a niche product, being customised, having a premium price—these are all strictly social properties. Being a partnership, being a joint venture, having a dominant market position with respect to one's competitors are all strictly social relations. A purchase, a sale, a merger,

an advertising campaign, a bankruptcy are all strictly social events. And what is true of these entities may qualify as a strictly social fact. Take, for example, a firm's property of being indebted. A firm's being indebted is not a state of its warehouses or its desks or computers, although it is reflected in those objects (in particular in its documents) too (Ferraris 2009). Being indebted is a social property. Consider a sponsorship arrangement: such a partnership is not a sum of money nor is it the piece of paper on which the terms of the agreement are registered: (typically) it is a social relation between two firms.

Calling an entity (object, set, property, relation, event, fact, and the like) 'social to a larger extent' or 'strictly social' does not *ipso facto* amount to claiming that the existence of that entity is completely independent of the existence of any non-social entity. The purchase of a house is of course typically related to the existence of the house, of the seller and of the buyer, and probably of many other related human beings (bankers, real estate agents, various service providers, cadastre). One should not, therefore, forget that, no matter how abstract human reality becomes, it very rarely, if ever, becomes totally disembodied and unrelated to any physical thing, and to that very special physical thing that are human bodies, with their powers and needs. What ought to be remembered about strictly social entities is that their *esse* is not their *percipi*: strictly social entities emerge from habits, behavioural patterns and the like, but they do not coincide with possible representations of such habits and behavioural patterns. Languages, laws, religions, but also markets, GDPs, interest rates, currencies, would not exist if human beings did not exist; however, that does not mean they are just what human beings believe (or stipulate) that they are (DeLanda 2006). Just like being a queen bee is not the same as being so-described, being a certain brand or a certain market strategy is not the same as being so-described.

One particularly interesting aspect of social reality is its capacity to spread to non-strictly social or to non-social reality. Social reality is not self-contained: it does not only include strictly social entities. For instance, a purchase is a strictly social transaction: however, one may purchase a patent or pay for enrolment in a university programme; and one may purchase an artefact, such as a chair or a house; but one also may purchase fish, mushrooms, or even fresh water, or found stones, or a piece of land, all of which seem to be non-social entities.

Social ontology also enables us to have a look at strictly social properties and relations amongst non-social entities, such as human relations. Take, for example, being a CFO: being a CFO is a typically human role (perhaps, in the future it might be taken over by software or some other device, but at the moment we have CFOs in flesh and blood). Being a CFO is a strictly social property (role) and what CFOs do in their capacity is strictly social (social events, social actions).[21] But CFOs themselves are not strictly social entities, they are good old organisms. Being a customer, being a client,

being a provider, a consultant, a manager, an employee, all appear to be strictly social properties of non-social entities (human beings).

In the same vein, wild horses, buffalos, mushrooms, parts of a coast, forests, pieces of land, and the like, may be considered as non-social entities, but they may have strictly social properties or relations, such as being the property of a certain person or firm or public institution, being a buildable terrain; and they can undergo thoroughly social processes, such as being advertised, purchased, confiscated, auctioned, and the like. Conversely, we ought to bear in mind that many strictly social entities may have thoroughly non-social properties. For instance, a negotiation may last for a week, just like a volcanic eruption or a flu; a board meeting may take place in a certain town, just like a storm or an earthquake. A convention may be effective as of a certain date and expire at another date, thereby lasting for a certain period of time, just like the growth of a plant or the orbit of a planet. Social entities are of this world, and they are not ideal entities, like the number 73 or the principle of the excluded middle, or the properties of triangles, which seem to be utterly non-concrete and ideal.

One ought not to be too hasty in carving up the world into completely separated realms: the social and the non-social, understood as the so-called natural. There are numerous borderline cases, such as kinship and leadership, or allegiance and loyalty, certain types of property and communication. Take, for instance, kinship. One may think that being a family, a parent, a member of a certain group are strictly social properties and relations, as they could not exist without some form of shared understanding, agreement, or stable convention. However, it is not only true to say that a certain horse or bear is the mother of another horse or bear, in purely biological terms. It is also something that shapes the relation between those two bears or horses. Many animals, not only humans, defend and support their offspring. The same counts for leadership or hierarchy. Leadership and hierarchy can be understood as social properties of non-social entities (typically humans or groups thereof). But they also exist amongst other beings living in groups, such as wolves, apes, horses, lions, and the like, often associated with reproductive and eating patterns. Similar patterns apply to communication and to property.

The point, once again, is not to uphold some generic theory of the continuity of social reality with respect to natural or non-social reality in order to take a philosophical position as opposite as possible to the one of phenomenological and postmodernist theorists—although some of the most interesting and intriguing contemporary positions in ontology have embraced such a hypothesis (cf. Ferraris 2019). The point of the foregoing comments is, rather, to appreciate the complexity of the ontological issues, which emerge from the paradigm change in recent debates and which uncovers a dense and intricate network of conceptual issues of great interest for the social sciences.

4.6.5 Product Ontologies, Historical Ontologies

Ontology also helps us understand emerging types of objects, owing their existence to the joint introduction of new technologies, production patterns, standards, and conventions. Such is the case, for instance, with the existence of brands and products of industrial design. By way of example, consider artefacts such as houses, roads, watches, suits, smartphones, and perfumes: in order for all of these entities to exist, intelligent beings must exist, too, since they all are products of intelligent design. However, that does not make these entities any less real or perspective-relative than mountains.

In order for products to come about, habits and conventions must exist, too, as well as technologies. For example:

- the existence of houses seems to depend causally upon social habits and technologies pertaining, amongst other things, to dwelling in built shelters (instead of, say, caves);
- the existence of roads seems to depend causally upon all sorts of habits, institutions, conventions, and technologies related to travelling, trade, vehicle production, and to territorial administration;
- the existence of watches seems to depend causally upon social conventions and technologies related to time measurement and time organisation (as well as to design and fashion);
- the existence of suits seems to depend causally upon social conventions and technologies pertaining to dressing and textile production (and a number of related things, such as gender identity, status, age);
- the existence of smartphones seems to depend causally upon social habits, conventions, and technologies pertaining to communication;
- the existence of perfumes seems to depend causally upon social conventions and widespread habits pertaining to distinction, gender, status, and the like.

Because many of these habits, conventions, and technologies have come about only in certain places and at certain times, perhaps quite contingently, it could be argued that certain ontological domains have emerged in historically and geographically specific contexts, and that certain types of entities began to exist at certain points in certain places. We should not be too surprised about that, since many other intuitive ontological fields or layers are plausibly historical, too, for instance, life and animality: life has emerged only at a certain stage and only in certain places. As far as we know, for a long time there were (and in most places, there still are) no organisms in the universe: neither were there organs or organic functions.

4.6.6 Ontological Dependence and Feedback

It seems that there would have been no such things as houses, suits, watches, and wines if the relevant habits, conventions, and technologies had not existed. And it seems quite plain that the actual existence and the specific features of such habits, conventions, and technologies drive and steer production, dissemination, and also innovation in the relevant fields. On the other hand, the very existence of certain artefacts may contribute to altering the features of the relevant social conventions and habits, thereby triggering innovation in technology and design. This is an aspect of objects and of entities in general that shall attract our attention later: the exuberance of objects—as a complementary pole to the creativity of subjects. We all know how the introduction of new products and services in information technology has triggered new habits and conventions, which retro-acted upon the development of new products and services in information technology, leading from telephones and computers to the current infosphere. Now that all seems quite intuitive, but, if we consider certain details, matters become more complicated.

Take, for instance, being a house: houses exist out there in the world, inhabited by humans and all sorts of pets. Something can be a house, or a certain type of house, like a villa, a farmhouse, a palazzo, a cottage. Houses may be associated with certain types of production patterns or origins and thereby be Khmer houses or Victorian houses. And they may be strongly associated with their design and authorship, and thereby be, for instance, a Ludwig Mies van der Rohe house, or a Frank Lloyd Wright house, or a Palladian Villa.[22] As yet, mass production, standardisation, branding, patenting, and trademarking have not gone far enough for house models to emerge in a strict and widespread sense, except perhaps in very specific contexts, such as a certain period in social housing, especially, or prefabricated social housing (think of Jean Prouvet's *maison tropicale*).

In order to appreciate that difference, we should compare houses to suits, watches, wines, smartphones, or perfumes. Suits, watches, smartphones, and perfumes are not—as such—very different types of objects from houses: they are artefacts. However, social patterns pertaining to their production, use, and dissemination have changed over the years in such a way that they have become quite different types of objects, at least in a certain sense. For centuries, clothes were designed and sewed by tailors, following standards and fashions, and imitating models. However, at a certain point in time new patterns emerged, such as technological innovation leading to industrial production of highly standardised products; branding and advertising; trademarks and patents.

4.6.7 The 1961 Pink Chanel Suit

The emergence of such well-known patterns in society brought about ontological changes in products, too. Before mass production, branding,

and trademarks emerged as widespread social phenomena related to industrial and communication technologies, a coat or a pair of trousers were, ontologically speaking, closer to houses, which are still semi-standardised models. But nowadays we do not simply talk about trousers, suits, and shirts, but rather—to take one notable example—of 'the 1961 Pink Chanel Suit'. As the determinate article 'the' indicates, when we talk about the 1961 Pink Chanel Suit, we are not referring to a number of features that many different pieces of clothing share, for example, being pink suits produced in 1961 by the firm Chanel: specimens of the 1961 Pink Chanel Suit may in fact have been materially produced in 1962 or 1963 etc.

The definite article indicates that we take all relevant pieces of clothing to be specimens of one single model (launched in 1961) (cf. Strawson 1959). Those pieces of clothing are what they are (specimens of the 1961 Pink Chanel Suit) not only by virtue of their material features (type of wool, measurements, colour, and the like) but also by virtue of their exemplifying a standard model. The existence of particular specimens of the 1961 Pink Chanel Suit does not affect the existence of the 1961 Pink Chanel Suit as such; that is a model, and does not coincide with any of its specimens. However—and this is relevant, too—if all existing specimens were destroyed after production had stopped, it would be disputable whether the 1961 Pink Chanel Suit would still exist. For instance, it would be open to debate whether new specimens produced by the same firm with the same machinery and after the same model would still be 1961 Pink Chanel Suits or simply replicas thereof.

Moreover, as we all know, if something shares all the physical features of the standard 1961 Pink Chanel Suits (size, material, colour, shape . . .), that does not make it a specimen of the 1961 Pink Chanel Suit. For instance, if some other individual tailor or firm has produced suits with those exact physical features, even if they are indiscernible to an expert, and even if the same type of machinery has been used to produce it, and it has even been put on the market in 1961with a Chanel label, at the same price as a Chanel Suit, that still does not make it a specimen of the 1961 Pink Chanel Suit, unless it has been commissioned by Chanel. It might rather be a counterfeited (i.e. fake) 1961 Pink Chanel Suit.

For most products of design, and especially for those protected by trademarks, perceptual indiscernibility does not constitute identity: objects produced outside the conventions defining the model, even if they are indiscernible from a specimen of that model, or even if they have higher technical qualities than the model, are not thereby specimens of that model. Being a (specimen of the) 1961 Pink Chanel Suit includes being produced according to the standards defining that model.

Ontological questions, pertaining to the very being of such entities as trademarked products, are irreducible to epistemological questions pertaining to how such products are experienced or talked about or thought

about, individually and collectively: if some individual, or even a group or a community, considered a replica or an imitation of a 1961 Pink Chanel Suit as a proper or real 1961 Pink Chanel Suit, for instance, because they do not know that it was produced outside the standards defining that model, or simply because in their community that difference is not relevant, it would not make that replica a real or true or authentic 1961 Pink Chanel Suit.

The distinction between causal dependence upon human existence and intelligence, and mere relativity to human perspectives provides us with the intellectual tools to appreciate two things. Firstly, the distinction between the two following facts:

- that there would be no 1961 Pink Chanel Suit if humans did not exist;
- that there would be no 1961 Pink Chanel Suit if technology, habits, and conventions in Europe and in other parts of the world had been different than they actually were, at the beginning of the 1960s.

And, secondly, the completely different—and false—claim that the 1961 Pink Chanel Suit exists only relative to human perspectives, that is, that being a 1961 Pink Chanel Suit consists in being so thought about or talked about by some person or group of persons; that the 1961 Pink Chanel Suit is not out there, just like mountains and seasons.

One may be mistaken about a design item being a 1961 Pink Chanel Suit just as much as one may be mistaken about an animal being a squirrel rather than a rat, or about the size of a lake, or the distance between two mountains—that seems to be precisely the point of producing and purchasing fakes and of having legislation prohibiting certain forms of imitation. A fake product seems to be what it is not, and may seem to be what it is not, because of its appearance, of the way in which it is presented, and the like. But what it is not is precisely a standardised type of product, whose existence does not seem to coincide with its physical presence as an individual object in space-time. Mistaking a fake 1961 Pink Chanel Suit for a real one is not like mistaking a person for another: it is not a mistake about what individual a certain entity is (say Sandra, instead of Lucy): it is mistaking a certain individual object for a specimen of a certain model, where the model is not an individual piece of clothing but a trademarked or patented, or otherwise standardised type of product. A fake 1961 Pink Chanel Suit may objectively look like an authentic one, it may have all the features that such a piece of clothing has, without being a real 1961 Pink Chanel Suit. And the same counts for a fake iPhone 12, a fake pair of Gucci shoes, a fake Dior perfume, a fake Juventus t-shirt.

4.6.8 Products: Real and Fake

The emergence of trademarked products is sometimes correlated with the emergence of further ontological features, such as rigidly defined and

standardised sizes, colours, or versions, as well as of tolerable forms of customisation, partly defined by producers (colours and versions, in particular) and partly dictated by more or less widespread market standards and conventions (such as sizes of clothing items, types of cars, like saloon, convertible, SUV). For instance, a certain iPhone model may be available in a range of colours, defined by the producers; a shoe model, the classic Gucci loafer, is typically available in a number of sizes, which are made by the producer but correspond to certain local, national, or even international standards that also apply to different models of the same firm and to models of other firms.

As trademarks, patents, and brands emerge, correlated social patterns and the applicable ontological layers also tend to develop. For instance, the emergence and success of models produced on a large scale may typically unleash the phenomena of imitation. Other producers typically imitate the features of a successful model and produce and distribute similar products, possibly for lower prices. Things may go further: the emergence of brands, with their aura of status and prestige, but also of reliability, may give rise to the phenomenon of counterfeiting, as we very well know. Now, in order for something to be a fake or counterfeit item of merchandise (e.g. a fake iPhone), it takes the already established existence of a genuine model (the real iPhone) as a recognisable product produced in a number of models. Quite trivially, there could be no counterfeited products in a world without serial production.[23]

Models, in order to exist, need certain production patterns. Once such patterns exist, the relevant ontological layers can emerge. Pre-industrial production does not produce such things as the 1959 Gibson Les Paul or the 1966 Lamborghini Miura, because it does not know models, that is, what it produces is not based on the same kind of patterns: design and development of a new model by a certain brand followed by production, advertising and distribution. The ontology of standardised products is extremely complex and diverse. In fact, most of what we are surrounded by is a specimen of a certain model. The introduction of the relevant technologies and design techniques may bring about the emergence of further ontological layers.

4.6.9 Emerging Layers

If you now consider the process leading to the emergence of certain entities, such as product lines or models, you see an interesting circle between attitudes, technologies, legislation, and innovation: products are designed, firms develop models, they introduce or adopt different colours or sizes or versions (e.g. a car model can be available in 4WD and 2WD, or in a saloon or SW version).

The emergence of models is related to the phenomenon of imitation and counterfeiting; therefore patents, licences, trademarks, and all the

corresponding legislation tend to emerge, thereby enriching the ontological structure of product-beings. After patents and licences are introduced, the question whether a certain entity is or is not a real specimen of a certain model involves such documents.

That something is a real 1966 Lamborghini Miura is partly rooted in some document, like a patent, but that does not amount to the perspectivist claim that what makes something a 1966 Lamborghini Miura is a perspective or a way it is interpreted.

One of the most influential ways of tackling the preceding issues, in traditional philosophy, has been distinguishing between human reality, as thoroughly human-made, and natural reality, as existing independent of any human participation in it. As we have seen, this has gone hand in hand with the tendency to consider all of human reality as existing in a merely perspective-relative fashion.

The classic source of inspiration for such a distinction was the ancient Greek division between nature and convention, and between nature and artifice, variously reformulated in early modern times. In recent debates, the questions raised by ancient and modern thinkers about "the fundamental nature and mode of existence—what philosophers call the essence and the ontology—of human social institutional reality" (Searle 2010, ix) have been revived: "What is the mode of existence of nation-states, money, corporations, ski clubs, summer vacations, cocktail parties, and football games, to mention just a few?" (*ibid.*).

Realist philosophers have been taking a variety of stances with respect to "the essence and the ontology" of social reality, and in particular have been developing a series of original ontological investigations. On one side of the spectrum, we have neo-conventionalist theories, such as Searle's (1995, 2010) attempt to accommodate social entities in reality, via conventions, ultimately based upon shared intentionality. Searle's scheme pivots upon a conceptual innovation: he distinguishes two different meanings of 'subjective' and 'objective', which he (1995) deems as "epistemic" and "ontological". From an ontological perspective, something is subjective if it involves some kind of state of mind or representation, in order to exist. For example, toothaches and love are ontologically subjective, because there cannot be toothache or love without someone feeling the ache or being in love. Snow and rocks are ontologically objective, because it does not take the existence of any representation of snow or rocks in order for snow or rocks to exist and be what they are. From an epistemic point of view, the distinction is drawn in terms of judgements: a judgement is epistemically objective if it states a fact, be it an ontologically subjective or objective fact; a judgement is epistemically objective if it expresses a state of mind of the utterer, be it about an ontologically objective or subjective matter. A judgement about subjective matters, such as attitudes, beliefs, desires, intentions, may be (epistemically) objective, that is, accurately representing the

relevant states of affairs it is about; or it can be subjective, for example, if it simply expresses a subject's preferences about them. For instance, you can objectively state that most children like ice-cream, thereby stating an epistemically objective fact about ontologically subjective states of affairs (children's preferences); or you can express your epistemically subjective disgust with respect to the ontologically subjective state of affairs that most people do not care about war and famine in faraway areas of the world. Or you can state something epistemically objective about ontologically objective states of affairs, for example, state that there is snow near the summit of a certain mountain, or express something epistemically subjective about something ontologically objective, for example, your being fascinated by a certain mountain.

Searle introduces this conceptual distinction in order to preserve the difference between the purported ontological objectivity of natural phenomena and the purported ontological subjectivity of all social phenomena. The second theoretical move he makes is to formulate a general principle about social reality, according to which all of it ultimately is a matter of shared subjective intentionality: all social reality is ontologically subjective, but it has an epistemically objective status, because we can formulate objective statements about subjective human attitudes, and all institutional and social reality is ultimately the expression of ontologically subjective attitudes, which can be objectively stated.

For instance, according to Searle, from an ontologically objective perspective, money simply is green cellulose; but from an epistemically objective perspective, it is a matter of fact that human beings treat such pieces of paper in certain ways, and that makes facts about money as epistemically objective as facts about toothache. In other terms, from an ontological perspective, money does not objectively exist: all there is is cellulose. However, it is true that people treat banknotes and many other things in certain ways. It is, therefore, true that money exists, that is, it is an epistemically objective fact that humans treat banknotes, coins, cheques, and credit card transactions as valid methods of payment.

Searle's account has been criticised for a number of reasons:

i. it is accused of taking a mystical stance with respect to collective representations (or collective intentionality), whose existence is held by many as highly doubtful and problematic (Ferraris 2019);
ii. it is accused of excessive conventionalism and subjectivism, being unable to explain the unintended emergence of real social patterns, of which members of a given society may not be aware.

By way of example, Searle's approach does not account for the fact that it does not take a population's awareness of the notions of inflation, or game theoretical equilibrium, respectively, in order for such phenomena as inflation and equilibria to emerge in that society; and it does not take a

population's awareness of what social discrimination is in order for social discrimination to exist amongst members of that population (DeLanda 2006).

The existence and status of collective intentionality is a delicate topic in social ontology, as it reintroduces issues that haunted modern philosophy for centuries: the use of the very notion of collective intentionality seems to evoke the *prima facie* very doubtful existence of some meta-individual mental states, instantiated by individual human beings, having the same attitudes with respect to the same objects. How could there be such shared mental states, mental states that appear to be the community's and not the individual's, and how could they be accommodated in the minds of human beings having ordinary individual mental states, too? Is it legitimate to declare that a certain community literally has certain beliefs, above and beyond the individual beliefs of its members or at least alongside such individual beliefs?

Secondly, the appeal to collective intentionality as an ontological foundation for social reality seems to ascribe magical powers to intentionality, as if it were entirely a matter of beliefs what social entities exists and what powers there are; but it is hard to be entirely persuaded that sovereign debts depend only upon shared beliefs and that financial crises are produced by the spreading of some collective representation.

Intentionalism also seems to suffer from a form of occasionalism, that is, from the problematic idea that it takes an active involvement of some thinking (in this case collective) subject, not only in order for certain things to exist or come about but also in order for them to persist and endure in time: that banknotes remain money only insofar as people think of them in such terms, that a certain person is a CEO or a graphic designer only insofar as they are regarded to be one, by themselves or by others, and that a certain vehicle, pair of shoes, or piece of land are property of a certain person or firm only insofar and as long as they are so regarded by someone. That may be taken to entail that there are no married couples, no mortgages, and no firms when all the relevant persons are asleep.

Further, intentionalism seems to embody a form of spiritualism that largely underestimates the social role of objects, for instance, of documents and of hybrids: objects that seem to make certain kinds of social institutions and entities possible. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a society in which property exists, but there are no inscriptions or acts in which the status of properties is reported or registered (Ferraris 2009). And it would be hard to account for the existence of currently central social entities, such as email addresses, social media campaigns, big data, and the like, without reference to the very material objects and devices through which humans relate to them, for example, smartphones, computers, various kinds of information networks, and so forth. It seems difficult, in a world such as the one in which we are living in the twenty-first century, to overestimate the ontological significance of technology.

As to the second series of objections, some realist philosophers are becoming increasingly unsatisfied with ontologies distinguishing very sharply between the ontological status of natural entities and that of social or cultural entities. What makes them dissatisfied with such models as the one elaborated by Searle is the excessive dependence of social reality upon conventions: many realist philosophers insist that social entities display at least some features of good old reality. For instance, as we have seen, some have claimed that one can be wrong about social reality just as much as one can be wrong about any other type of reality (DeLanda 2006, 1): social entities are not entirely perspectival. Secondly, one can be wrong about it both individually and collectively: for instance, at certain times many in society have ignored economic laws pertaining to inflation, but inflation has nevertheless come about in those times as a consequence of their printing money or diminishing the amount of precious metals in coins. Economists know very well that only a few prophecies are self-fulfilling (and not necessarily the mainstream ones).

Take, for instance, welfare policies and their impact upon society. It is quite intuitive that the correlation between welfare policies and their effects upon society is not a simple matter of stipulation and that it takes good theories to be able to model it and to predict it. We are now in a position to estimate the impact of different kinds of monetary policies upon credit, inflation, and savings. But it took decades of economic theories and sophisticated mathematics to model such an impact, even leaving substantial theoretical controversies to one side. Figuring out what social patterns there are and even what social entities play a causally relevant role with respect to certain social phenomena may be just as hard as figuring out what kind of physical or chemical patterns, entities, and regularities there are or are responsible for certain biological phenomena.

If we take a look at debates in social ontology, we can indeed see a discussion between positions highlighting the intentional and representational aspects of social entities and those that insist upon their robustness and perspective-independence. Taking a general position with respect to such debates is beyond the scope of this book, and we prefer to discuss theoretical options case by case, leaving it up to our readers to evaluate the appropriateness and fruitfulness of the different available options. However, it ought not to strike us as odd that, in times of ever-increasing social interdependence, strongly intentionalist and strongly conventionalist positions have less consensus than in the past.

Finally, intentionalist and conventionalist positions have been criticised for reducing the status of social entities and phenomena to the way or ways in which they are experienced or thought about by members of a community. Social conventions causally depend upon the existence of intelligent beings, but that does not mean that laws, money, word-meanings, prejudices, and inflation rates are what people think they are or that they are as people experience them to be. Just as the orbit of

planets may greatly differ from the way it is experienced by theoretically unsophisticated human beings, so can money, laws, word-meanings, and cyber-identities.

4.7 Perception and Its Significance

Although not all realist philosophers share the same attitudes towards it, perception has doubtlessly received growing interest in recent decades. Besides its intrinsic philosophical relevance and recent advances in the psychology and neurobiology of sensory experience, there is a more fundamental point to the return of perception in philosophical debates, and that point relates to the alternative between various forms of Postmodernism and New Realism.

4.7.1 How Many 'Perceptions'?

We are aware that in management and especially in marketing, the use of such expressions as 'perception', 'perceiving', and 'perceived', typically characterises a focus on merely subjective aspects of a relationship, as opposed to what might be taken as its objective features. For instance, we are all familiar with the idea that the expression '*perceived* value' does not simply refer to value that is perceived by someone, that is, correctly appreciated by them, but rather to the extent to which someone appreciates such value: the same thing may very well have a different 'perceived value' for different consumers. In contemporary philosophy, such expressions as 'perceiving', but also 'seeing', 'hearing', 'smelling', and so forth tend to be used in factive terms. If I ascribe a certain perception to someone—for instance, I say that Louise saw Paul entering a post office—I am thereby claiming that what they experience as being the case is in fact the case. In contemporary debates, it would be odd to say, for instance: "Louise saw Paul entering the post office, although the person she saw was not in fact Paul"; or "Rashid heard his mother singing under the shower, although the sound was actually coming from a radio". In such cases, philosophers would nowadays use different expressions, for instance, "It seemed to Rashid that the sound he was hearing was his mother's voice". Such terminological differences are harmless, but they are nonetheless symptomatic. In what follows, the word 'perception' is used in the factive, philosophical sense.

4.7.2 Abandon Ship

In order to appreciate the significance of perception in contemporary debates, it ought to be noted that perception played a very limited role in the central and final decades of twentieth-century philosophy. That may strike many of us as odd and even as suspicious, especially if we bear

in mind what an important role perception plays in ancient philosophy and even more in modern philosophy. Theories of perception may even be used for classifying the different types of philosophical approach in modern times, especially on the empiricist side.

Sophisticated philosophies of perception were developed until the beginning of the twentieth century, especially by phenomenologists, most notably by Husserl (1900–1) and Merleau-Ponty (1945). As a consequence of the rise of philosophical hermeneutics in continental Europe and of linguistic approaches in Anglo-Saxon academia, perception lost much of its philosophical appeal and was almost forgotten until the end of the twentieth century,[24] only to be rediscovered as a fully legitimate and interesting discipline at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The reasons for the fall of interest in perception are manifold. Primarily, it lost much of its appeal simply as a consequence of the rising stars of the philosophy of language and of linguistic philosophy or hermeneutical philosophy. Those fields attracted the most creative minds for quite some decades, so there was simply less energy left for the philosophy of perception. Secondly, the dwindling of interest in the philosophy of perception is probably due to its historical relation to epistemology, another discipline which lost much of its appeal due to the rise of linguistic philosophy and hermeneutics and of the philosophy of science proper.[25] Third, it was also abandoned due to its proximity to psychology and hence to empirical matters of fact regarding the specifically human psychological constitution. Finally, it fell out of favour because of the assumption that significant philosophical problems could be addressed by framing them in linguistic terms. It took the descending trajectory of linguistic philosophy from the late 1970s onwards to restore interest in the philosophy of thought and in the philosophy of experience and perception, both as legitimate topics in themselves and as sources of insight for other branches of philosophy. That is what has been happening over the past decades.

4.7.3 Antirealist Arguments From Old Phenomenological Assumptions

Another relevant aspect of twentieth-century philosophy of perception is its relation to antirealist projects: the most influential philosophy of perception in the twentieth century was fundamentally related to an antirealist project, that is, to the phenomenological one, inaugurated by Husserl (1900–1). Although phenomenology had emerged in a cultural climate of reaction against German idealism, and had initially been seen by many as sympathetic with philosophical realism, or at least as a neutral position, it soon turned into a clearly antirealist project under the pressure of Husserl's transcendental turn, which began in 1907 and led to the publication of the most radically antirealist texts of the twentieth century, that is, Husserl (1913, 1929, and 1931), all of which contain

theories of perception. With its emphasis on the constitutive role played by subjectivity in bringing about full-blown perceptual experiences, phenomenological analyses of perception soon became classic premises in antirealist arguments. However, twentieth-century philosophy soon took what came to be known as *The Linguistic Turn* (Rorty 1967; Dummett 1973) and dedicated most of its interest and analyses to language proper, leaving behind perception as such. Under the influence of Wittgenstein (1953), Austin (1962a), Quine (1960), Sellars (1956), and, later, Davidson (1984) and Rorty (1967, 1979), philosophy in English-speaking academia dedicated less and less attention to perception and more and more to linguistic phenomena, such as understanding, meaning, interpretation, translation, and belief-ascription.[26]

A similar decline of philosophical interest in perception took place in continental Europe, above all in Germany, where the hermeneutic movement to some extent substituted the phenomenologically central notion of perception with the linguistically and historically related one of interpretation, especially under the effect of Heidegger (1927) and Gadamer (1960); alternatively, as in France, it focused upon themes deriving from structuralist linguistics and semiotics.

Parallel to this conviction was the widespread assumption that language plays an essential role in the shaping of human experience, or that there is no proper experience, thought, or mind without language. Such a position was shared by philosophers as different from each other as Quine, Davidson, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Dummett.

4.7.4 The Terrible Twentieth

Alongside the widespread conviction that philosophical problems needed to be formulated in terms of linguistic analysis or in language-oriented philosophy (Strawson 1959; Dummett 1975; Tugendhat 1975), leaving behind other traditional fields of enquiry, another position gained consensus in the middle of the twentieth century: the thesis of the language-relativity of experience in general. Not only was perception considered as philosophically less relevant than language and interpretation, new trends emerged in the philosophy of perception, claiming the relativity or non-independence of perceptual experience. For instance:

- during the 1960s it became acceptable to assume that perception was not independent of theory, that it was theory-laden, and hence that subjects with different theoretical and linguistic backgrounds would experience the same things in different ways (Kuhn 1962; Feyerabend 1969);
- in the same period, it became acceptable to claim that perception, by itself, was "blind", that is, unable to articulate the experience of an objectively existing reality and that it took language and

concepts to turn perceptions into proper experiences of a purportedly objective world. It was, correlatively, claimed that no beliefs or thoughts could be ascribed to animals that perceive the world but do not have language (Davidson 1982), no matter how sophisticated their behaviour;

- it became acceptable to maintain that subjects with different language frameworks perceive the same scenarios in significantly different ways, for example, that subjects speaking languages with a richer vocabulary related to snow colour and shades of white would perceive the very same snow in different ways (Whorf 1962);
- it was claimed that perception alone does not constitute a justification of belief and is not a reason for belief (Davidson 1983) or that perceptions are brought about only by the interaction between sensory inputs and conceptual competences, which are not shared by non-human animals (McDowell 1994) Hence, that non-human animals do not have perceptual experiences.

Although most of the aforementioned positions were not yet postmodernist in spirit, they contributed to consolidate the theoretical framework upon which postmodernist antirealism would be built,[27] in particular by means of their denying the existence of a direct experience of reality or of a content of experience independent of historical and cultural conditions and conditionings. Not only was realism under attack by many forms of antirealism proper, but also the very idea that there could be a field, domain, or context of human experience in which reality was manifest and attained in non-linguistic, non-conceptual, non-theoretical, or non-cultural terms became philosophically suspicious. Debates about the conceptual or non-conceptual content of perception developed in the 1980s and 1990s and continued until the early decades of the twenty-first century (Evans 1982; McDowell 1994; Peacocke 2001), but for mainstream postmodernist philosophy and culture, believing in the existence of a robust and autonomous domain of perceptual experience, not subject to cultural conditioning, became a sign of lack of theoretical sophistication or of the succumbing to some purported "myth of the given".

4.7.5 Perception Returns

Perception has been regaining philosophical respectability over recent decades. The radical thesis that thought is in and of itself a linguistic phenomenon has been significantly nuanced. As the tide of linguistic philosophy began to recede, a number of tenets started to be questioned or to come under attack, most notably the following:

- that perceptual experience is thoroughly shaped by linguistic backgrounds and conceptual frameworks;

- that perceptual experience is theory-driven and theory-laden and that, hence, there can be no non-theoretical or trans-cultural content of experience, even in perception; that interpretation already begins at the level of perception;
- that the philosophy of perception is part of epistemology and that it does not constitute an independent domain of phenomena;
- that perceptions, without concepts, cannot count as proper experiences and cannot contribute to the formation of beliefs.

Arguments have been unfolding along the following lines: although language does play an enormous role in human experience, and in human culture, it is incorrect to claim that there cannot be any experience without language, that non-linguistic living beings cannot be ascribed proper experiences, or that all the experiences of living beings that have language are permeated by language to such an extent that even the most basic perceptual episodes may not be considered as autonomous from language. In order to elaborate such arguments, a number of theses had to be made explicit and criticised.

A typical reason for claiming that all experience is in some way linguistically permeated was the assumption that, in order to have proper perceptions, something must appear to a subject as part of a world which is different from them, an objective world. And that, in order to distinguish between itself and the world, a subject must have the concept of self and the concept of world, that is, be able to ascribe experiences to itself and distinguish its experiences as subjective episodes from features of things existing independently of its experiences: "Creatures without conceptual capacities lack self-consciousness and—this is part of the same package—experience of objective reality" (McDowell 1994, 114). The upshot of the argument was that, paradoxically, perception is not a window to the world and a pre-theoretical form of exposure to it, common to humans and other living beings; rather, in order to take place at all, it needs a sophisticated conceptual framework. Burge (2010, 111–283) calls that position "Compensative Individual Representationalism" and ascribes it to some of the most prominent philosophers of the twentieth century: "Many philosophers . . . maintained that objective reference is possible only for beings that have a language. Quine, Davidson, Dummett, and others urged this view" (148). "The core assumption of the syndrome is that an individual cannot empirically and objectively represent an ordinary macro-physical subject matter unless the individual has resources that can represent some constitutive conditions for such representation" (13). And

> Davidson . . . maintains that the only way to ground a specific content for representational states is to appeal to a communication situation in which a speaker and interpreter are fixed on a common entity in the distal environment.
>
> (269)

Another possible argument, typically attributed to McDowell (1994), is that, in order for perceptions to warrant judgements, for example, in order for the perception of a yellow tennis ball to warrant the judgement that there is a yellow tennis ball in my hand, perceptions and judgement must share some of their content, that is, part of the perceptual content must already be penetrated by the conceptual capacities which would be brought into operation by the judgement proper.

All of these arguments tended to cut through the animal domain and to distinguish quite radically between (non-infant) human beings as capable of thought and experience and other living beings as incapable of either one. Postmodernism adds the familiar emphasis on the culture-relativity of all conceptual frameworks and dissolves the original and crisp contribution of perception to experience altogether. All experience takes place within one conceptual framework or another.

4.7.6 One World Is Enough . . . for All of Us!

Recent philosophies of perception have abandoned many of the typical assumptions of linguistic philosophy and have devoted growing attention to the discoveries of cognitive science and of the psychology of perception.

In particular, a significant step back from the over-intellectualisation of perception has been taken, a step back from the assumption that, if a being (say, a wolf) lacks a certain concept (e.g. the concept of sheep), it cannot experience something as being such as the concept would characterise it: that wolves cannot actually perceive sheep as sheep. Or that, in order for a being to realise that something which has occurred to it was just an illusion, it would necessitate that that being has the concept of illusion and of reality. Or that, in order for a being (say, a dog) to re-identify something (say, its master) as being the same over time (the day before), it would need ontological concepts such as entity, individual, identity, difference, time interval: hence, that since non-human living beings lack such concepts, they do not really recognise anything as being the same, that is, dogs do not recognise their masters over time. Or that, if a being has conceptual abilities and has a corresponding concept to classify it (e.g. if an adult human being sees a sheep and has the concept of a sheep), what that being experiences is determined by their having that concept: that adult humans always perceive sheep as such, or that there is a complete difference between the way they perceive things they already know and have concepts of (say, sheep) and the way in which they perceive things they do not have a concept of (say, types of trees that they cannot recognise as being specimens of a particular kind, like beeches or oaks).

The step back from the over-intellectualisation of perception leaves the possibility open to conceive that human beings belonging to different cultures, and hence having possibly different concepts of the same things, may nevertheless perceive the same things in the same way due to robust patterns

of perception. That in perception we may be one, or that in perception, belonging to different cultures, different subcultures, or even different historical periods, or different religions does not prevent us from experiencing things in the same ways or as having the exact same traits: that traits and aspects of things may be there for all, before any particular concept is brought into operation, or even despite the possibility that very different or even conflicting concepts may be brought into operation by different beings.

The refusal to over-intellectualise perception rejects one version of the many-worlds paradox, that is, of the paradox that different human beings may live in different worlds because of their belonging to different cultures or subcultures or historical periods or groups: the many-worlds paradox, which is, perhaps, a possible revisitation of Kuhn's (1962) incommensurability thesis, is a classic of postmodernist thought (Rorty 1979, 315–332; Abel 1995, 491-ff.). In one of its versions, it may take the following form: in order for a being to be aware of anything at all, and in particular to be aware of something as being there and having certain features, that being must have the respective conceptual capacities, in particular the concept of reality, of a distinction between itself as a conscious being with certain subjective appearances and of a reality distinct from such appearances, and it must have the concept of object and of objectivity, and the concept of that particular thing (say, the concept of red and the concept of tomato, if it is perceiving a red tomato). But if that is the case, since different beings have different concepts, and different concepts may apply to the same entities, then different beings may experience the very same things in very different ways: they may not only categorise and classify them in different ways but even see, hear, smell, taste, feel them in radically different and possibly incomparable ways.

Lovers of blue cheese with a rich set of concepts applying to such cheeses could be described as perceiving something different, when they see and smell and taste a *Roquefort*, than, say, young adults who have never tasted blue cheese before or who have only tasted it a few times but have never heard or read much about it. Jazz or classical music experts would be said to hear something different than laypersons who lack such notions as, say, solo, improvisation, fugue, or counterpoint.

Fashion or art connoisseurs could be ascribed perception of different things, or different perceptions of those things, when looking at a dress with certain lines and of a certain model, or at a painting with certain colours or brush strokes than laypersons or persons from different cultures. The person lacking the concept *tailleur* or *suit* would not be able to perceive the features of the corresponding pieces of clothing; a person lacking the concept of *Klein blue* would not be able to perceive the colour of something of that colour as having that particular colour: they would not be able to discriminate it and recognise it as such.

That is one of the issues at stake in the debate: if intellectualism about perception is right, then persons lacking the concept *international Klein*

blue cannot perceive that particular colour even if, from a physiological point of view, they see it: they cannot discriminate it, memorise it, like it, remember it, desire to have something of that colour. They just will see something blue, or of a particular shade of blue, close to a colour concept which they already have.

Take non-human living beings, for example: if lacking language means lacking the corresponding thoughts, including thoughts relating to perceived things, then a cat or a dog may be credited with responses of certain kinds to certain tastes or smells but not with recognising those tastes, remembering them from one meal to another, or with desiring to experience them again, and so forth.

The many-worlds paradox clearly has an impact upon marketing both as a theoretical discipline and as a practice, since it concerns the very possibility of conveying information about an object that a consumer may not have a concept of, or a rich variety of concepts to describe, or to a consumer belonging to a culture in which colours, smells, sounds, tastes, as well as shapes, textures, and many other aspects, such as light or darkness, are categorised in different ways.

In a radically many-world scenario, in order to get through to the consumer from a different culture or subculture and convey information about a product or feature of a product that they lack the respective concepts of, one ought to resort to words and concepts in their culture and not simply *show* the colour (of a dress, of a cup), the pattern (of a carpet, of a curtain), the sound (of a musical instrument, of a ringing tone), the shape (of a car, of a motorbike, of a watch). No one would deny the obvious fact that shades of colour, sounds, tastes, shapes, patterns, textures, and the like are more or less immediately associated with different ideas, collective memories, shared or controversial values, depending upon the particular cultural context that one is in, and upon the concepts, notions, and even knowledge which one has. Of course, there are very many things which a connoisseur can appreciate about a wine or a cheese, or a sonata, a jazz solo, a suit or a chair or a car, which a layperson or a person belonging to a different culture or subculture is doomed to miss. But that is not the point. The point is not about associations and collective memories or appreciation of details: it is about the very basic possibility of perceiving the same things and features, regardless of the particular culture one comes from: it is about the possibility that you may perceive the same sounds a jazz lover perceives, and not mere noise, if exposed to jazz music; perceive the same colour patterns a connoisseur perceives if exposed to an impressionist painting; perceive the same shape a watch collector perceives while observing a certain watch; or the same taste a wine lover perceives while tasting a certain *Bourgogne*.[28]

From the perspective championed by some leading contemporary philosophers of perception, we may expect to assume that sensory qualities, such as shapes, colours, tastes, smells, textures, patterns, sounds,

dimensions, movements, light, temperature, and the like, as well as their arrangements (patterns of colours, melodies, compositions, two- or three-dimensional images) may be a properly universal repertoire of elements common to all or at least most human beings.[29] Part of the rejection of the thesis of the language-relativity of perception has relied upon the intrinsic theoretical implausibility of the conjectural machinery needed to configure perceptual experience (having the concept of perceptual experience, temporal duration and self, in order to perceive a teddy bear or a dummy is quite demanding), but it has also partly relied upon substantial empirical evidence from the psychology of perception (Burge 2010, 2009).

If over-intellectualisation is in fact what the word says it is, an exaggeration, then sensory features of the world may be out there for all humans to experience, and even partly across the species divide, with other, non-human living beings. That may be the case with, for instance, sizes and shapes, if not for tastes, smells, and sounds pitches or altitudes.

Another aspect of perception which has been vindicated against over-intellectualisation is its impermeability to theory: not only does perception not rely upon conceptual capacities in order to configure genuine experiences of the sensory properties which make up a shared environment—the things we see about us when we open our eyes, the ones we hear when we do not close our ears, and so forth—and not only does it not depend upon the emergence of particular theories, conceptual paradigms, and world-views in order to present to us the sensory world, but it is, by and large, refractory to conceptual innovations, theoretical discoveries, or simple changes of opinion. After the rise and success of heliocentric systems, humans have been experiencing the very same patterns as when Geocentrism was orthodoxy. The light, colour, size, trajectories, and so forth of the heavenly bodies have remained unchanged. Even simple perceptual illusions or puzzles, such as the feeling that there is a natural *up* and a natural *down* in the universe, remain unchanged by theoretical awareness that people at our antipodes have the soles of their shoes facing ours (Ferraris 2012).

As we have seen, the refusal to acknowledge the relevance of perception is not strictly related to a form of antirealism. However, *de facto*, most linguistic philosophy and most twentieth-century philosophy fuelled antirealism precisely by adhering to positions that denied the relevance, autonomy, and robustness of perception and by claiming that all experience, including perceptual experience, required conceptual abilities and, more specifically, linguistic competences to come about. Thus, they paved the way to, or reinforced, forms of antirealism such as linguistic idealism (all reality is linguistic reality, all experience is linguistic experience) and linguistic/conceptual/epistemological relativism (all reality is relative to one or another linguistic framework, conceptual framework, epistemological, theoretical framework).

There has been a renaissance in recent decades of a strong philosophical interest in perception, in a possible non-conceptual content of perception, in the relation between perception and consciousness, between perception and self-awareness, and between perception and self-ascription of properties (cf. Burge 2013; Peacocke 2014). All these indicate the possibility of widening our understanding of what unites humans (and humans with other living beings), as well as of what may divide them, and of course they reinforce the idea of a reality, or a feature of reality, that is encountered as being there by humans of all ages and cultures, regardless of language, of worldview, and of allegiance to possibly different scientific theories, religious cosmogonies, or political positions. And that awareness is, of course, a very fruitful premise for marketing theory and practice.

4.8 The Centrality of Objects

Alongside the rehabilitation of perception and of the respectability of the idea of reality, the last twenty years have witnessed a revival of objects as a more than worthy topic of philosophical analysis (Harman 2002, 2018; Garcia 2010; Bryant 2011; Bogost 2012).[30] Although realism does not coincide with object-oriented philosophy, its return has gone hand in hand with a resurgence of interest in objects: that transformation has determined a reversal of postmodernist antirealism and ontophobia. Besides theoretical change, the mutation has affected attitudes and style. If objects previously tended to be considered as insipid and banal theoretical topics, they have recently acquired an intriguing, disquieting, and even uncanny allure in philosophical debates. That wave has touched architecture, literature, visual arts, design, and it is ready to release its full potential upon marketing theory and practices.

4.8.1 Things

If we look to the conventionally accepted beginnings of the Greek philosophical tradition, we find a great respect for things and an appreciation of their position in the world. We also find a normative role of things as parameters of truth, and of "thingliness", as a paradigm of being. Being robust, stable, unchanging, that is, thingly, is one of the most typical attributes of being and is even considered a divine feature, such that, in Greek ontology and later in Christian theology, such attributes are ascribed to the *ens perfectissumum*, that is, to God (Heidegger 1936). Perfection, in turn, is used in mediaeval logic and metaphysics to express the plenitude of reality, that is, of thingliness. What led to the loss of interest in objects or rather in their (possibly intrinsic) thingliness was a combination of factors: on the one hand, modern philosophy dedicated growing attention to epistemological problems, that is, to the way things come to be reliably known. Empiricism, Criticism,

and Idealism, as well as their subsequent reformulations in positivistic terms, emphasised the features of experience that underlie the subjective representation of thingliness, that is, of shape, bulk, permanence, invariance, numerical identity, compactness, robustness, and so forth.

In the centuries of epistemology, the very word 'object' started being preferred to the old expression, 'thing' (*res*). Unlike '*res*', the concept of 'ob-ject' evokes a relation to something outside an entity, something opposite ('ob-') to it; something a thing is not, but that makes it what it is. In fact, the word 'object', from 'ob' ('opposite', 'in front of') + 'iacere' ('to lie') evokes a sense of being 'in front of' an experiencer, or, in modern terms, a 'subject' (Heidegger 1957). It is in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that things come to be inspected as ob-jects, that is, in terms of the particular ways in which they can be represented or experienced by a subject: being a thing becomes a matter of being experienced as something relatively stable within the flux of subjective human representations. That tendency culminates in the twentieth century with phenomenology. In Logical Empiricism, too, the notion of object as entity or being is stripped of all possible thingly attributes and defined as that which can be referred to by the subject of a possible statement Carnap (1928, 1). Thus, the notion of a thing-being, a *res*, is conceptualised as an object, that is, as an indifferent correlate pole of cogitations or statements. A third element in the depletion of the thingliness of entities, reinterpreted as objects, was the reduction of "objects as entities" to "objectivity as a feature" of subjective experiences and judgements.[31] Objectivity as impartiality, as inter-subjective comparison and acknowledgement of subjective judgements and experiences takes us a further step away from objects and even more from things as a possible example of being and reality. Contemporary Postmodernism developed the modern aversion to objects (*ontophobia*) by elaborating linguistic versions of it that even dispensed with universal structures governing experiences. However, the very word 'object' was never completely sublimated by modern and postmodern philosophy, and it remained as an uncanny guest of contemporary culture. Another typical modern transformation was that which led from things to processes, from what is stable to what moves and brings about change. Things became too boring, too platitudinous, too inert for modern philosophy and science. Hence, the focus upon processes, events, changes, relations. If existing independently, being autonomous, used to be considered as signs of ontological dignity until the seventeenth century, modern and postmodern philosophy experience every resistance, autonomy, robustness, rigidity, opaqueness as obstacles to the full development of theoretical models and even of freedom.

4.8.2 From Ob-jects to Objects

New Realists do not feel uncomfortable using the word 'object'. Recent attention to objects has not been limited to the crucial question of their

possible reality, as opposed to their being occasionally illusory, but also to their status as independently existing beings and to their powers as full-blown elements in an ontologically complex reality (Harman 2002, 2016). Objects have come back not only as irreducible inhabitants of a realistically conceived world but also as interesting beings in themselves. Speculative realists like Harman have urged that philosophy ought to resist a double temptation of "undermining" and "overmining" objects (Harman 2011a), that is, to reduce them either to their constituents (*under*-mining) or to sublimate them via more general principles, such as language games, discourses, or other over-objectual entities (*over*-mining). The past decade has witnessed a growing interest in object-oriented ontologies, as opposed to event-ontologies, process-ontologies, relation-oriented ontologies (Bogost 2012; Harman 2018). Objects have re-acquired philosophical interest. A large body of ontological work has been undertaken with the aim of investigating object types: from material or concrete inanimate objects (things) to living beings, to cultural objects, to abstract and ideal objects. The ontological notion of object has been sharply distinguished from the epistemological notion of objectivity and investigated in its own right.

What made objects appear uncongenial, boring, shallow, dull, stubborn, or even recalcitrant now makes them exciting, challenging, even fascinating: their indifference and sheer existence, before, above, and beyond all thought, experience, perception, relation, theory, or discourse:

- *Indifference:* objects have become themes of philosophical analysis and even speculation, because of their indifference to thought, language, interpretation, meaning conferral, or even function. Objects simply exist, they are there when we experience them and when we do not, they are the way they are, whether or not we perceive them, they relate to each other in ways that do not necessarily involve human interpretation or intervention; they may be used in a number of ways and be at hand in various guises, but their being is not exhausted by their counting as something for someone, being used in a certain way by someone, or meaning something to someone. Objects seem to be unaffected by, and impermeable to, all interpretation, discourse, and function. Objects are not docile, they are rather indomitable, even defiant.
- *Inexhaustibility*: objects may be referred to in a number of ways; they can be classified and categorised through different systems and theories; they can be named in different ways in different languages; they can be described in various ways—but they remain what they are, and no word, concept, predicate, or description can reveal their full potential.
- *Thickness*: objects are viscous, opaque, resistant. They retain their shapes and properties even if moved, transported, or exposed to

external pressure. They are bulky and tend to be mutually exclusive. They are cumbersome and cannot be done with easily. They remain there long after the forces which have brought them about have disappeared. They have structure and follow their own patterns and laws.

- *Pygmalionic-ness*: objects tend to have a life of their own, once they have come about. They even take up new roles or positions within the material and symbolic domains. They may even be prolific and bring about changes of their own. They are unpredictable and possibly rebellious, bearing in themselves the powers to reject the intentions of their makers and be used by others, even by enemies.
- *Exuberance*: objects always exceed all roles and functions, even the ones that they were created to perform; objects are indifferent to human intentions, interpretations, understandings, received and symbolic roles. At the same time, they are open to an almost unlimited range of adaptations and adventures.
- *Attractiveness*: objects tend to trigger reactions in human beings, who feel attracted to them, invited by them, seduced by them, bound to them. Objects awaken all sorts of feelings, sensations, fantasies, desires, plans, in humans as well as in other animals. They appeal to humans and often invite uses, gestures, functions, roles.
- *Modesty*: objects are not transparent, as concepts might be taken to be. Objects do not reveal themselves fully, or to everyone, at first sight. They always conceal possibilities, powers, and potential in themselves or in features which may remain latent for years or centuries and then be suddenly brought to light by a new encounter, an unpredictable occasion, or a different circumstance.
- *Fecundity*: objects inevitably alter their environment, both material and symbolic. They bring about novelty and affect their milieu in often unpredictable ways. The coming about of a new object, or of a new type of object, brings with itself an alteration of reality, and the whole environment needs time to adjust to it and find a new balance. Therefore, all objects carry a spark of creativity in themselves, often exerting their power upon human beings, who may be inspired by them, by their features, or by the relationships they make possible.
- *Ground-breaking*: objects often break new ground in the social domain, too, opening up new possibilities. The creation of a new object always carries with it a hazardous aspect, because its consequences can never be calculated *a priori*. Neither can the impact which it might have upon human society.
- *Institutional*: many objects not only exist in themselves but also make new forms of thought possible. Papyruses, books, libraries, computers, telephones, televisions, all have made new forms of thought possible, new types of computation, of experience, of sense-making, of interpretation.

- *Quasi-objectuality*: objects make social conventions possible by crystallising forms of relations and technological possibilities and coagulating around themselves a broad range of attitudes and expectations. They are socially foundational in the sense suggested by Latour (1991) and, before him, by Serres (1980).

4.8.3 Marketing and the Return of Objects

From the point of view of marketing, the revival of objects can play an enormous role. First of all, it can remove the widespread prejudice that good marketing theory and practice can entirely prescind from objects themselves and focus solely on linguistic and symbolic aspects of consumption. Objects have their own attractiveness, they trigger reactions, they awaken feelings, they aggregate communities, they identify groups and subcultures.

Secondly, the rediscovery of objects can help marketing understand the very phenomena with which it has been struggling for the last quarter of a century: for instance, the phenomenon of participation and co-creation (Ranjan and Read 2016) which can only be understood if we bear in mind that objects always conceal possibilities which go beyond the intentions of those who designed them and which can be made manifest by new circumstances, new opportunities, new encounters. Objects are inexhaustible, and every attempt to reduce them to the way they are talked about, understood, or symbolised by a particular community underestimates their potential for innovation, inclusion, adaptation, co-creation.

Thirdly, the rediscovery of objects can be a great opportunity to understand how new meaning and new thoughts, as well as new forms of life, new experiences, habits, communities can emerge under the effect of new objects circulating in a certain environment (Ferraris 2016), which is never exclusively a social environment but also ecological. Understanding the creativity of objects and their social indispensability can promote a deeper understanding of value, value creation, and value proposal. It is to these phenomena that we now turn.

Notes

1. Cf. Leiter's (2004) *trenchant* diagnosis: "Postmodernism is non-existent in all the leading philosophy departments throughout the English-speaking world, where it is regarded, with justice, as sophomoric skeptical posturing. (It is surely a scandal that Postmodernism is so often presented in the popular media as a dominant force in the academy, when it is almost completely irrelevant not only to philosophy, but also to economics, physics, classics, mathematics, cognitive psychology, most of sociology, physical anthropology. linguistics, biology, most of political science [rational choice theory, comparative politics, etc.], law, medicine—in other words, the *vast majority* of university disciplines!). The quietistic influence of Wittgenstein and

Heidegger has been pervasive only among those with little knowledge of philosophy; among philosophers, as noted, quietism has been a decidedly minority posture. The non-quietistic philosophers—the naturalists and otherwise—take up precisely the kinds of questions that have occupied the major historical figures, in many cases back to antiquity: the objectivity of moral judgement, the nature of reality, the relationship between mind and body, the character of the just society and the good life, and so on" (23, emphasis and all sorts of parentheses in the original).

2. In the last decades of the twentieth century, tables seem to turn, as to the relation between philosophy of mind and language on the one hand and ontology on the other: instead of reducing reality to human perspectives, philosophy investigates how to accommodate mind and meaning in a general ontology of the world. Cf. Dennett (1979); Dretske (1981); Millikan (1984); Fodor (1987); Schiffer (1989); Kim (1998).
3. More of that contempt, at Benoist (2017, 62). Quite often, postmodernist antirealist positions are portrayed stereotypically (and unfairly) as pure *rengaine*, without even mentioning their proponents, as if they were the mere result of widespread cultural idleness, conformism, and lack of rigour. Cf. already Nagel (1997, 6).
4. The kind of conformist allegiance to postmodernist antirealism should not overshadow the obvious fact that antirealism had to fight for every inch of academic credit and had to wait for social, cultural, and technological revolutions to reveal its full potential.
5. Claiming that reality is independent of human representations does not coincide with claiming that it is mind independent. Cf. Gabriel (2014a, 8–10); see also Gabriel (2014b, 174), where Gabriel defines ontological realism as the thesis that, in general, understanding the understanding (*sic*) of existence is not a precondition for fully understanding existence itself. Benoist is perhaps a borderline case for his expressing reservations with regard to the possibility of conceiving of a reality fully independent of any perspective or point of view, while subscribing to the view that true statements are such because of their correctly representing the way things are (Benoist 2011, 61).
6. It ought to be noted that the "dying" of representations together with their bearers or producers (human beings) is not as intuitively obvious or even as clear as it may *prima facie* look.
7. The quoted passage from Searle (1995, 153) continues as follows: "Except for the little corner of the world that is constituted or affected by our representations". See Ásta (2018b).
8. A classic logical argument against the claim that all reality must be, in principle, knowable, is known as 'Fitch's Paradox'. The paradox is a *reductio ad absurdum* of the *prima facie* acceptable claim that every truth is in principle knowable (or 'weak verificationism'). The argument attempts to prove that weak verificationism entails the absurd claim that every truth is actually known (or 'strong verificationism'). Cf. Salerno (2009). For a defence of antirealism from Fitch's Paradox, cf. Dummett (2001). See also Zardini (2015).
9. Perhaps, similar suggestions are to be found in certain early Vedic texts, where it is suggested that the core structure of reality consists of metres. Puzzlement about a similar dilemma rhetorically opens Boghossian (2006).
10. Not all of the philosophers targeted by realist objections are self-declared postmodernist antirealists. However, their writings are also picked out as clear formulations of possible arguments in favour of the postmodernist antirealism.
11. "'So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?'—It is what human beings *say* that is true and false" (emphasis in the

original). The passage is also quoted in Benoist (2017, 28). Actually, Wittgenstein's original text uses the expressions 'richtig' (and not 'wahr'), which would be more accurately rendered by 'correct' or 'right', rather than by 'true'. ("So sagst du also, daß die Übereinstimmung der Menschen entscheide, was richtig und was falsch ist?"—Richtig und falsch ist, was Menschen *sagen*"). The original German text sounds less disputable, because correctness evokes a normative evaluation, whereas the normative status of truth is controversial. Cf. Horwich (2018).

12. Gadamer (1960, Eng. tr. 474). In fact, there are at least two readings of the famous passage "Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache": the utterly antirealist reading insists that it should be interpreted as the claim that (i.) being as such can be understood, and that (ii.) such understandable being is language; another, more moderate reading is in tune with the milder hypothesis that we are discussing, that is, the portion of being that can be understood is language. This second reading leaves room for conceiving of a being that is not understood and is not language, but it still claims that understanding as such is of linguistic being and not of being *simpliciter*.
13. Marconi (2006) notes that Heidegger uses the expression 'true' in brackets.
14. The issue of the existence of truths that are unknown or not conceived of was discussed at length by Bolzano (1837, Eng. transl. Vol. 1, 108-ff. et *passim*).
15. For a discussion of related issues, cf. Cappelen and Lepore (2005). The contextualist revival has been viewed as a way of reinvigorating relativist positions that are in a way compatible with postmodernist positions. For a discussion of semantic contextualism and relativism, cf. Cappelen and Hawthorne (2009).
16. There is at least one reading of the Tarskian biconditional "'*p*' *is true iff p*" along the lines of a mutual convertibility of truth and reality. The standard example is: 'Snow is white' is true if and only if snow is white. Cf. Tarski (1936).
17. Dummett (2006) argues along similar lines and in particular for the absence of determined magnitudes in reality, independent of possible and actual human measurements or estimates.
18. Notice the ironic use of the inverted commas, qualifying not only the use of the early modern expression 'primary qualities', but also the very notion of properties, as if it were intrinsically problematic to conceive of properties which things simply can be discovered to have.
19. DeLanda (1997; 2006, 68–93) adopts an original interpretation of Deleuze's ontology (assemblage theory) with respect to social reality. For a position on social ontology that is radically alternative to reductionist models, cf. Harman (2016). Cf. the seminal Searle (1995) and Searle (2010), which extends and generalises that approach. Ferraris (2009) develops an articulated social ontology, pivoting upon the concept of documentality (*unter anderem*, as a radical alternative to collective intentionality). All these positions differ as to the specific strategies they adopt but share an attitude of reverse perspective with respect to social ontology: from the idea that all reality is socially constructed to the investigation of the way in which society is part of reality.
20. Not to be confused with the so-called Pygmalion Effect or Rosenthal Effect, which is another notion altogether.
21. What they do outside of their capacity as CFO may not be strictly social: for example, eating, sleeping, jogging.
22. And by 'Palladian' villa we could mean a villa designed by Andrea Palladio or a villa in the style of Andrea Palladio.
23. Of course, one-off products can be counterfeited too, for example, paintings, sculptures, or manuscripts. In those cases, we think that what is being

counterfeited is the thing having been made by a certain author: its being a Leonardo, not its being the kind of thing that it is. However, there is a link with mass production in terms of legitimate origin ascription.

24. There are, as always, notable exceptions, for instance, Chisholm (1957); Strawson (1959, 1966, 1979) Dretske (1969).
25. See Habermas (1968, Eng. transl. vii): "In following the process of the dissolution of epistemology, which has left the philosophy of science in its place, one makes one's way over abandoned stages of reflection".
26. It is all the more remarkable that Wittgenstein, Austin, Strawson, Quine, Sellars, and Davidson all wrote about perception.
27. The relation is particularly clear in the writings of R. Rorty with reference to the work of Quine, Sellars, Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida. It is on the basis of their arguments that Rorty (1979) develops his postmodernist philosophical position.
28. Of course, matters are never completely simple; for instance, training and habit influence the ability to focus and to maintain a high level of attention for a longer time. The fact that one may perceive something even if lacking the relevant concept does not entail that someone may automatically notice that thing or feature, if untrained or never exposed to it before.
29. One ought always to take into account possibly subjective aspects due to objective features of the world: for example, a seat of a certain dimension is experienced differently by someone weighing fifty kilograms than it is by someone weighing one hundred and fifty kilograms, but that does not mean that it is perceived as being *itself* different. A certain clothing size may be considered as petite in an area of the world in which average tallness is very high (say, in the Netherlands) while being considered perfectly standard in an area in which it is lower (say, in Italy, or Singapore).
30. Cf. Harman (2002); Bryant (2011).
31. For an analysis of the different meanings of 'objective', cf. Searle (1995, 8-ff).

5 Marketing, Management, and the Return of Reality

5.1 Marketing and New Realism: Introductory Remarks and Thematic Clusters

In the first chapters of this book, we have presented arguments against some common assumptions regarding realism and antirealism. On the one hand, we have attempted to show that the still widespread belief that realism is an unsophisticated or even pre-philosophical position that would not resist critical scrutiny is deeply misguided. Realism, as we have seen, is a fully legitimate philosophical position, which may be articulated in sophisticated fashions and has strong intellectual credentials. On the other hand, we have criticised the thesis that realism is a philosophically outdated, old-fashioned, or retrograde position. Realism has been attracting strong philosophical interest over the past decade(s) and is enjoying a period of intensive intellectual creativity. The third line of argument has sought to show that realism can provide interesting intellectual tools to management and marketing research and practice: that, unlike what was maintained in the heyday of postmodernist culture, marketing is not tied to the cultural and philosophical destiny of postmodernist antirealism but may profit by the insights, attitudes, and theoretical proposals of realist philosophy with particular regard to the fields of perception, experience, and social reality.

In this chapter, we intend to show that realism can provide fruitful and reliable concepts for marketing and management research: in particular, (i.) that realism offers insights for building alternative theoretical tools to the ones traditionally suggested by postmodernist thought and (ii.) that it can make available original and innovative categories, which break genuinely new ground in the intellectual exploration of human experience and behaviour, and of social phenomena broadly construed. Our goal is not to embrace one specific realist position but rather to show that realism offers a broad spectrum of theoretical tools and solutions.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, some of the most creative researchers in contemporary philosophy share a sense of dissatisfaction with respect to deconstructive, constructionist, or relativist strategies and

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solutions; they have begun to renew traditional questions about reality, its general and local features, its concrete articulation and experience. No less remarkably, the expression 'realist' has long lost its pejorative connotation and has been used by leading philosophers to define what they are doing.

In the first part, we have also insisted that the shift from postmodernist positions to realist ones has not been taking place in philosophy alone, as if it were some kind of isolated theoretical wave, taking place at one of the most abstract ends of cultural production: we are not even sure that the tendency is a primarily philosophical one. And we are strongly convinced that it has affected contemporary culture at large, from philosophy to the arts, from politics to consumer behaviour.

Also in that sense, the first part of the book did not aim to force extraneous philosophical categories into the debate over the social sciences, as if nothing had been changing within that very field over the past decades. We are convinced, too, that the postmodernist paradigm has undergone a period of slow decay and that contemporary societies have gained a renewed attention and respect for the issues historically heralded by realist philosophy.

In what follows, we shall discuss examples in support of our hypothesis: and the hypothesis is precisely that, not only is realist philosophy alive and kicking, but that marketing will be better off if it starts paying attention to what is happening in the field of realism.

We have organised this chapter around concrete cases. All examples have been borrowed from current management and marketing *topoi* or are considered by us to be fit for a marketing book. Examples function as concrete introductions to practical and theoretical problems, just as usual in business publications. They are first introduced and discussed in broad outline and then presented from the perspective of categories, attitudes, or insights borrowed from philosophical realism.

The goal of the case discussions will vary:

- in some cases, it will be shown that a classical example, which appeared to be understandable from a postmodernist or antirealist perspective, is in fact much better explained from a realist one (adequacy);
- in other cases, we shall attempt to show that a certain postmodernist doctrine is contradicted by known phenomena from marketing studies and that realism is compatible with it instead (fitness);
- in yet other cases, we shall introduce categories borrowed from realist philosophy to help chart new territory in marketing studies or to display how certain known phenomena can be better explained or better addressed by marketing research or practice (fruitfulness).

We have attempted to group our examples around four thematic clusters, which we find to be both intuitive and fruitful. Each thematic cluster

is intended to function as a bridge between a postmodernist and a realist perspective, in proposing alternative frameworks to well-known postmodernist *topoi*.

5.1.1 Reality and Subjectivity

The first cluster is "Reality and Subjectivity". Examples illustrating issues grouped in this cluster are relevant with respect to the general issue of reality's independence of subjective experience and of its irreducibility to any specific perspective or experience one may have of it. They overturn the postmodernist dissolution of reality in perspectives and narratives and highlight the opposite possibility: communication, relation, experience all tend to converge upon something from which they emerge, and they are about, or pivot on, something experienced, shared, and referred to.

Communication, for instance, has frequently been interpreted as a creative social dimension, able to increase and even produce reality (Baudrillard 1981). Hence, communication has been portrayed as a means by which subjects contribute to produce or constitute social objects. Further, it has been claimed that no object may be consistently considered to exist outside one form or another of communication. The examples that we intend to use instead aim to show that the perspective can be reversed: no communication is possible without some reference point, some object, some topic to refer to; and objects cannot be reduced to the different ways in which they are experienced. That is of central interest to marketing practice and research.

The theme of relation has been particularly relevant in so-called *Relationship Marketing*, where it has played a notable role during recent decades. It has been claimed that relations, and not objects or products, should be at the centre of marketing research and practice: that human relations confer all meaning and value to offerings and not objects. Our examples shall illustrate that the reverse is probably correct: relations do not confer all value and stability to objects, but rather objects make (new kinds of) relations possible and contribute to stabilise them.

Over recent decades, Postmodernism has co-opted two very relevant concepts from management and marketing in particular. Firstly, co-creation has been much debated (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004; O'Hern and Rindfleisch 2010; Ramaswamy and Kerimcan 2014; Ranjan and Read 2016; Roberts, Lynn, and Darler 2017) and appears akin to the postmodernists' passion for transformation and flexibility. For them, co-creation seems to be about subjects, not reality, and particularly about the capacity of subjects to bring about changes in reality, to add layers of meaning to it, and to change its function, simply by stipulating or implementing new ways of relating to it. A similar line of argument applies to the postmodernist view of participation. Participatory practices and proposals have usually been associated with the idea of subjectivity's

superseding reality and to a postmodernist sense of fluidity and change. Instead of defining what there is once and for all, postmodernists hold that everyone should be involved in an open conversation about what each of them finds relevant and worthy of discussion. Participation, for them, is what constitutes reality and objectivity, not the other way around. Once more, our examples will attempt to prove that the reverse is correct: only a realist approach can back participatory proposals and projects and offer a truly open platform for co-creation.

5.1.2 Reality and Value

The notion of value plays an enormous role in modern and contemporary philosophy. It also plays a crucial role in anthropology, sociology, law studies, political theory, psychology, economics, management, and of course in marketing.

The concepts of being valuable, having value, being valid, as well as their opposites and contraries are key notions in any theory of human behaviour. Modern economic theory and postmodernist philosophy are sympathetic in construing the concepts of value and validity in strongly subjectivist or relativist terms. Value theories tend to suggest the presence of hidden variables in the very semantics of the predicates "(. . .) is valuable" and "(. . .) has value", which are often paraphrased as shorthand for "(. . .) is valuable to (. . .) (possibly at time . . .)" and "(. . .) has value for (. . .) (possibly at time . . .)". Hence, purportedly, nothing simply is valuable, and nothing simply has value: whatever is claimed to "have" value, may in fact have that value but only relative to some perspective, attitude, or evaluation, which is supposed to be utterly extrinsic to it. Value is in the eye of the beholder and not out there in the world, in things themselves.

We shall consider the situation from an opposite perspective, for reasons which should have already become clear:

i. human preferences, attitudes, and habits are as real as the objects they are about: if it is true that values depend upon habits, attitudes, and institutions, then it does not follow that values do not exist, just as much as the claim that motion is not absolute, but always relative to a given reference system, does not amount to the claim that nothing really moves, out there in the world;
ii. secondly, and more substantially, suspicion regarding realism may be reversed: if it is true that, in order to understand value, it is necessary to account for human habits, convictions, preferences, and institutions, then it is legitimate to suspect that only a theoretical framework which is capable of accommodating and understanding irreducible social phenomena and institutions, that is, a rich

social ontology may be an adequate platform to address issues of value.

If it is true that artworks have value only relative to their being so valued, it does not mean that any individual is in a position to stipulate and proclaim the value (or the market value) of an artwork simply by expressing their appreciation of that artwork. Or that the market value of a certain thing is a direct function of any individual preferences. The fact that I would only be prepared to pay €100 for a painting that has been auctioned for €10m does not make that painting worth €100 in any possible way.

iii. even if we look at what makes something valuable to individuals, groups, classes, or whatever, we do not stumble upon completely haphazard or intransitive preferences. We have got used to reading that it is the consumer's identity that determines what he or she values or finds valuable (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Gilmore and Pine 2007), and that identities, in a postmodern world, are liquid, unstable, and capricious (Giddens 1991; Bauman 2000). However, as we have already suggested, we find that the reverse is just as plausible: often, individual and collective allegiances are forged with strong reference to presumed facts or circumstances, offerings are frequently discussed and appreciated against the backdrop of a growing interest in accurate factual information about them. There are large segments of markets that are increasingly asking for dispassionate, objective, and reliable information about offerings; legal systems have not remained unaffected by such demands, any more than have advertising or packaging. In what follows, we shall discuss examples illustrating the relevance of the role of reference to reality for the notion of value.

To begin with, it was claimed that individual and collective identities are often defined with respect to possible narratives, with the obvious background assumption that in the postmodern world there is no single authorised, legitimate, overarching meta-narrative, accepted, even in principle, by all individuals and groups. Hence, individual and collective identity ultimately seem to depend upon largely contingent and unstable narratives, and such narratives are not subject to any dispassionate scrutiny or even principle of mutual consistency. Or so the postmodernist story goes (Arnould and Thompson 2005; Gilmore and Pine 2007). However, our examples will show that all narratives always claim to make reference to certain circumstances, things, or purported states of affairs, and that they always raise normative issues of correctness, accuracy, legitimacy, appropriateness, competence, completeness, impartiality, etc. They will also show that such aspects are not only inescapable, but also, far from

disappearing due to the effect of the postmodernist wave, they are rather gaining new momentum in contemporary societies, in particular with respect to consumer behaviour and consumer identities.

In a nutshell, we have been told that consumers value things that are compatible with who they (believe they) are; but we may answer that consumers also partially define who they are with reference to what they recognise or believe to be really valuable, and that they tend to acknowledge value on the basis of what they believe to be the case.

Along similar lines, we shall present and discuss examples pertaining to the domain of forgery and counterfeiting. As we have seen, prominent marketing theorists claim that, ontologically speaking, nothing is real and authentic, but that something ontologically fake and inauthentic may nevertheless be phenomenologically real and authentic (Gilmore and Pine 2007). We have found that proposal to be self-contradictory, but we shall nevertheless discuss examples in which it is quite plain that the distinction between being real and being fake, being counterfeited and being authentic, may be quite intuitively understood against the background of reference to reality. That will also offer us the opportunity to show that postmodernist antirealism in marketing is often fuelled by an excessively puritan understanding of realism, as a commitment to the existence of physical objects alone, regardless of the concrete social and institutional frameworks which encompass them. Hence, postmodernist marketing and management theory finds itself with conflicting intuitions:

- every object is as "real" as it can be and there are no "un-real" objects;
- every artefact is human-made, hence there are no ontologically authentic objects.

Only an ontologically sophisticated position can account for the intuitive distinction between real and fake.

5.1.3 Reality and Experience

The third cluster of concepts will revolve around the centrality of experience as a focus for marketing and management in general. We have dealt with the notion of experience at length in the first part, especially highlighting the shortcomings of postmodernist frameworks in the determination of its structure and relevance. Experiential Marketing insists upon the relevance of experience to marketing and has broken new ground in marketing research. Nonetheless, its allegiance to some crucial tenets of Postmodernism hinders a full development of its theoretical potential with respect to the very fundamental categories that it proposes.

Examples from the third cluster revolve around the notions of authenticity and of immersion.

As to authenticity, our examples will illustrate that the classification of an experience as authentic cannot be carried out without reference to some direct exposure of an experiencer to reality itself. Correlatively, a richer ontological framework will show that the distinction between authentic and inauthentic experiences is not a mere expression of a subject's "self-image".

The idea of experiential context will also be addressed by way of examples, mainly aiming to show that experiences gain value and relevance also in light of the real features displayed by such contexts. We shall discuss immersion in experiential contexts against the backdrop of an ontologically rich idea of experience and of its possible objectual and environmental counterparts, of its power to produce sparks between the experiencing subjects and their experiential contexts. A richer notion of experiences, which does not deny the relevance of the phenomenological tradition but integrates it by underlying the very internal relevance of reality to experience, shall be used to make sense of what experiencers look for in experiential contexts: whether merely intransitive experiences or rather transitive encounters with reality and reflexive self-discoveries.

5.1.4 Reality and Innovation

The swarm of notions revolving around the concept of novelty—such as innovation, transformation, becoming, beginning, start, launch, fecundity, and so forth—plays a central role in modern and contemporary culture, and of course it exerts an irresistible attraction on consumers, as well as on researchers and managers. Almost all contemporary societies—as opposed to many past cultures—tend to read 'new' as 'better'. We want to possess new smartphones and tablets, to travel to new destinations, to visit new museums, and to live new lifestyles. The power of what's new is impossible to overestimate. The theme of novelty and innovation does count as a particularly critical test for realism. Can a realist position legitimate itself not only for its strictly theoretical credentials but also as a fruitful, fecund, stimulating, and promising proposal? Can realism help understand change and instability or is it the philosophy of the *status quo*?

The examples we provide seek to demonstrate that realism is able to give a significant contribution to the interpretation and promotion of novelty and innovation. But we are going to be more daring than that: we are going to claim, through a series of examples, that realism is a stronger theoretical platform than Postmodernism for the understanding of novelty and innovation.

We shall produce examples to illustrate a notion which has played a significant role in recent realist philosophy, that is, the notion of invitation, recently championed by Ferraris (2016). The notion of invitation is

a strong intellectual provocation, since it suggests a radical inversion of the classical idea that innovation takes place when a subject brings about a new object, and it suggests that innovation may in fact be interpreted as an object or a reality somehow calling upon a subject or inviting a subject to adopt a certain new attitude.

CASE STUDIES

5.2 Case Study: Diffusione Tessile (Reality and Value)

THE CASE

MaxMara Fashion Group is an Italian fashion holding established with the MaxMara brand in 1951; it operates with 41 agencies and over 5,000 employees through a network of 2,300 retail points in 105 countries. In 2019 its turnover was 1.63 billion Euros. The group collections offer high-end women's clothing, produced through excellent industrial procedures. An in-depth analysis of processing methods and quality control during all phases of the production cycle guarantee a meticulous attention to detail regarding items of clothing down to their smallest details and have transferred the original family tailoring tradition to the current industrial business scale. The result is a range of coats, suits, parkas, jackets, trousers, and high-quality accessories, which epitomise the strongest fashion trends of the moment and offer a total look pivoting on elegance and functionality.

The MaxMara group operates with ten brands. The distinctive features of the main MaxMara brand are: tailoring tradition, luxury materials (extensive use of cashmere), experimentation, internationality, modernity, and status. Other high-end brands in the group are PennyBlack, Marina Rinaldi, Max&Co, SportMax, iBlues.

MaxMara Fashion Group launched the retail store chain Diffusione Tessile at the beginning of the 1990s. Diffusione Tessile offers a vast array of women's clothing at affordable prices. Its retail stores are large, with ample display space and even larger storage facilities.

The retail policy of Diffusione Tessile is still unique in the Italian business landscape—and probably worldwide. Indeed, retail stores are exclusive retailers of remainders of the MaxMara group, particularly the MaxMara, Pennyblack, and Marina Rinaldi brands: items are stripped of their labels and re-labelled with the Intrend brand, then sold for much lower prices. Items are not faulty but are exactly the same products offered in the other stores of the group during the preceding season. An item of identical quality, stripped of its label, loses the capacity to charge the higher price the known brand can command. Every exhibited item is presented in a limited number of sizes only, but the storage space contains an ample range of sizes. The shopper simply asks a shop assistant to retrieve the desired size

or colour. In some cases, for instance, in the case of MaxMara trousers, labels cannot be completely stripped off the items and the Intrend label is simply added to the item, which also retains the original brand label. Intrend is a private label devoid of any significant advertising budget and only available at the Diffusione Tessile retail stores.

Customers are fully aware that, when entering a Diffusione Tessile retail point, they will come across the very same high-end MaxMara Fashion Group selection, sold with discounts of up to 80% off the original price. A quick look at the catalogues of the previous season makes the position quite clear. On social media, it is easy to come across comments by surprised customers who are stunned by this type of branding policy.

That is a marketing policy based upon the different evaluation of clothing items sold in different seasons. Re-labelling seems to produce the paradoxical effect of highlighting the identical quality of an item sold in two consecutive seasons.

The Diffusione Tessile retail chain is enjoying a slow but growing success on the Italian market.

What makes this particular type of brand policy possible?

DISCUSSION

Diffusione Tessile and the Role of Perception

5.2.1 Two Senses of 'Perception'—A Friendly Reminder

The case of Diffusione Tessile helps us focus our attention upon a number of aspects that may be underestimated or even overlooked by a marketing paradigm driven by postmodernist assumptions, that is, perception and ontology. Our theses shall be that perception plays an independent role in the case of *Intrend*, a role that cannot be reduced to any theoretical or conventional factor and that the ontology of standardised products constitutes the basis for understanding the phenomenon.

In the social sciences, as well as in casual conversations, the word 'perception' is often used loosely to cover the following:

i. its literal meaning evokes the familiar biological, physiological, and psychological phenomenon of perceiving something, understood as a sensory experience involving the direct and personal encounter with an object or the witnessing of an event: seeing something, hearing something, feeling something, tasting something, smelling something, all count as standard examples of perception, as well as more complex episodes, such as synaesthesia and kinaesthesia. In that first sense, it is said that someone perceives (hears) a melody, (sees) a red apple, (tastes) a fruity chardonnay, (feels) a rough fabric, (smells) a musky perfume, and so forth. This sense of perception is also personal and factive: someone can pay a bill for me, in which

case my bill will be paid, but if someone listens to a song or tastes a soup for me, that soup or that song will not be perceived by me. Perception is autoptic, not vicarious.

ii. a semantically much more metaphorical, and historically derivative, meaning: 'perception' generically evokes the way in which something is subjectively experienced, valued, or considered by an individual or a group, as opposed to the way it really is and no matter whether the experience or the valuing have anything to do with sensory encounters. In this second sense, it is said that the extension of data traffic to smartphone subscribers is perceived by them as a reward for their fidelity.

As to the first use of 'perception'/'perceiving', we may say that someone literally perceived (e.g. heard) the sound of church bells at midnight: there was such a sound and the subject heard that sound. As to the second, metaphorical use of 'perception'/'perceiving', we can say that restaurant customers may perceive the availability of gluten-free or lactose-free food on its menu as a form of respect and acknowledgement, while others may perceive it as a yielding to alimentary fashion.[1] The two meanings are not mutually exclusive. I can listen to a politician's speech and perceive their word choice as a sign that they are open to adopting a certain policy.

The past fifty years have witnessed a double tendency, that we have already addressed:

- to minimise the role of perception proper, reducing it to a form of negligible and non-independent aspect of interpretation;
- to emphasise the scope of perception in a metaphorical sense, by suggesting that there is nothing out there, nothing whose presence and features different perceptions are about.

That double tendency has made it very difficult for theoretical models to understand what is going on in cases like the one of *Diffusione Tessile*.

5.2.2 Intrend and Perception Proper

Realist philosophers, most notably Ferraris (2012, 2014a), have insisted that the reduction of perception (first sense) to a sort of (theory-laden, culturally conditioned, and language-dependent) interpretation was a theoretical exaggeration and have proposed that perception ought to be considered as a phenomenon with its own rigid and unamendable fabric, relatively impermeable to cultural conventions, theoretical assumptions, or linguistic habits.[2]

If we come to our example, we can notice that both meanings of 'perceiving' could be legitimately applied but in opposite ways to the case in point: on the one hand, it may be said, and it ought to be said, that

consumers are perfectly able to perceive (see, feel) that the clothing items sold by *Diffusione Tessile* are qualitatively identical to the ones sold by the other retail points and bearing the standard *MaxMara*, *Marina Rinaldi*, and *Pennyblack* labels. Their physical aspect, their fabric, colour, shape, weight, the material they are made up of—all of these features are exactly the same because, materially, *Intrend* items are nothing but the very same objects that were sold the previous year with those other labels.

Perception, in a literal sense, helps consumers appreciate an aspect of commodities that has remained unaltered by the re-labelling, re-branding, etc.: they are buying *Intrend* items, but *Intrend* items are in fact nothing but former *MaxMara*, *Pennyblack*, or *Marina Rinaldi* items, and that fact can be confirmed autoptically. Not only can it be confirmed by them, at the moment of choice and purchase but, since perception is robust and not modelled by theories, beliefs, or assumptions, consumers who are interested in *MaxMara*, *Pennyblack*, or *Marina Rinaldi* not only assume but also know that those items will be perceived by others exactly as by them. And by that we mean, primarily, that they know that what the items look and feel like is indistinguishable, for them and for others, from *MaxMara*, *Pennyblack*, or *Marina Rinaldi* items. Another point altogether is whether customers who purchase those items do so also with the intention of having others believe, on the basis of their perceptions (in the first sense) that those items are in fact *MaxMara*, *Pennyblack*, or *Marina Rinaldi*, and whether they also buy such items because they want to be considered by others as the type that can afford original *MaxMara*, *Pennyblack*, or *Marina Rinaldi* clothing. That would take us down an interesting path in which consumers might be in some way described as socially counterfeiting themselves (not the clothing): to give themselves the appearance of *MaxMara*, *Pennyblack*, or *Marina Rinaldi* customers. But that is not the point of this case.

Of course, that *Intrend* items are indistinguishable from *MaxMara*, *Pennyblack*, or *Marina Rinaldi* ones can be autoptically appreciated because it is the case, independently of any particular interpretation: same material, colour, shape, sizes, and so forth. Perceiving depends upon being. Consumer ability to perceive sameness of shape, colour, fabric, texture, etc., is an irreducible fact that does not depend upon their evaluation of *MaxMara* policies. They can see and feel that the items are just the same.

Perception is not an accessory factor, because it allows consumers to build a value-bridge between what they are buying and the quality standards they associate with the original brand but also with all symbolic aspects related to that brand. By buying *Intrend*, they are buying something that is in fact identical to a *MaxMara* product, and they may associate certain qualities with the *MaxMara* brand.

As we have noted, the metaphorical sense of perception, that is, the use of the distinction between the way something is and the way it appears to someone at a certain moment, is an indispensable intellectual tool for

all the social sciences and practices, including marketing. One cannot exclude perceived value, perceived security, perceived efficiency, and so forth from social disciplines. However, the spreading of postmodernist and antirealist philosophy has brought us to an almost complete oblivion of the literal meaning of 'perception', as a direct and possibly revealing sensory encounter with something and as a source of first-hand, autoptic information. That is also because the second, metaphorical, sense of 'perception' may be paraphrased in a number of contexts as 'interpretation' (more or less consciously taking *a* to mean or suggest that *b*). Privileging the metaphorical sense of perception has also led to a neglect of the *factive* undertone of the verb 'to perceive' and of a number of connected verbs ('seeing', 'hearing', 'smelling', 'feeling', 'tasting'), which, at least in most standard contexts, implies the correctness of the reported experience: if I am correctly said to be perceiving that something is cubic, then what I am perceiving is *in fact* cubic: in this respect, perceiving is like knowing (Williamson 2002; Searle 2015; Brewer 2011; Mitova 2018).

We ought to pay attention to the fact that the re-labelling is supposed to alter the way consumers value some of the features of retailed items, such as, for instance, relational features, including status-related ones. Some customers may feel inclined to purchase *Intrend* clothing items for themselves because they may judge that that course of action is the best to acquire a precious clothing item at a convenient price. Or they may even assign extra value to the items being re-labelled, for instance, if they feel that purchasing *Intrend* instead of *MaxMara*, *Marina Rinaldi*, or *Pennyblack* is a sign not only of good taste but also of intelligence and independence or even adventure: that is, they may value the very purchase form as an experience of research and discovery. Some, though, may hesitate to give them as presents, if they believe that a clothing item from a past season and with a heavy discount may be considered ('perceived' in the second sense) as a cheap present, literally and metaphorically.

5.2.3 The Real Features of Intrend

One of the interesting aspects of realism is its capacity to appreciate the complexity of social phenomena without flattening them or illegitimately polarising them. For instance, we have insisted that the sensory properties of *Intrend* clothing items are perceived by consumers themselves and constitute a rigid and unamendable layer that is discernible by any human being with properly functioning sensory organs. No matter what their attitudes towards brands, price policies, fashion, corporate social responsibility, or whatever, consumers perceive (from a sensory point of view) clothing items in the same way: perception is "unamendable" (Ferraris 2014a).

We have also talked about possible differences in evaluation of those items by consumers with different attitudes, suggesting that what is—and

is perceived to be—the same, in strictly perceptual terms, may be valued differently by different consumers. But that, we would like to add, does not intend to suggest that there are two opposite levels: the level of real (material, sensory) features that might be perceived and the level of social features that are not real, because they are a matter of subjective interpretations. The interpretive sense of perception conditions the valuing of the pieces of clothing, not their status. *Au contraire*, not only having a certain colour, shape, texture, and so forth but also being a *MaxMara* item, being an *Intrend* item, being a clothing item from a past collection, being a re-labelled item, etc., are all real properties of real clothing items that are not relative to customer perspectives in any possible way.

The distinction between 'perception' as sensory encounter and 'perception' as interpretation does not correspond to an ontological chasm between objective sensory properties and (say) subjective social properties. Social properties are real and ontologically stubborn, too. They can be ignored or mistaken for something else, just like any other properties, but that does not make them subjective or depending upon personal interpretations (DeLanda 2006). Counterfeited products are a classic case in point: something may look, feel, taste, or smell the same as something else, and even bear an indistinguishable label, and especially it may be taken to be an authentic item of a certain product type (a bottle of *Sassicaia* wine, a *MaxMara* dress) by customers or even by distributors and retailers, but it could be a fake item, that is, not what it pretends to be. And that is a perfectly objective fact that can be ascertained by inspecting its production history, as lawsuits show us.

Objects can lie. Objects can pretend to be what they are not. More precisely, they can be designed and implemented to cheat and mislead in all sorts of ways. However, and this is the most important aspect, objects can be counterfeited, because they may appear to be what they are in fact not. What they are in fact not is what something else is: for example, an authentic *MaxMara* piece of clothing. The point becomes subtle here: items of *MaxMara* clothing, just like iPhone12s or Rolex watches, exist. That means that a *MaxMara* piece of clothing is not simply a piece of clothing with a certain shape, colour, size range, fabric, material, and label but a certain standardised type of clothing (remember the example of the *1961 Pink Chanel Suit*). A *Renault Clio* is not simply a car, or a car with certain material features and a 'Renault Clio' inscription on the car body: it is a standardised type of product. Standardised products are, we find, tokens of certain types (a packet of *Barilla* pasta, a pair of *Gucci* shoes, etc.). Counterfeited products are products that are perceptually undistinguishable from certain standardised types of products, thereby misleading consumers into believing (or making others believe) that they are tokens of a type of which they are not in fact tokens. For example, a counterfeited Rolex watch is a watch that is perhaps identical to a real *Rolex* watch, down to the smallest details, but is not in fact a *Rolex* watch. It is not a

Rolex not because being an authentic *Rolex* is a matter of narratives or meaning bestowals but because being a *Rolex* is a property that depends upon conditions that that watch does not meet (i.e. being produced by Rolex SA or by a licensed company). A *MaxMara* piece of clothing is not simply an object with a certain aspect but a token of the *MaxMara* type.

What happens in the case of *Intrend* is the opposite of counterfeiting: if a counterfeited *MaxMara* is a piece of clothing that is indiscernible from a *MaxMara* but is not, in fact, a *MaxMara*, then *Intrend* re-labelling is the stripping off of the real social property of being a *MaxMara* from an original *MaxMara* item, while leaving all the other properties. It is like being a Car of the Year: once the year of victory has passed and Car of the Year has been awarded to another model, the winning car of the previous year preserves all its material properties, but it is not the Car of the Year any more.

Since it is *MaxMara* itself that undertakes the alteration of those real social properties by re-labelling items of clothing, the act is valued by (certain) customers as a mere bracketing of an ontological status that was historically present, by a legitimate authority. They know that the items they are trying on are materially identical to others that were not re-labelled, that were bought for a much higher price, and that are being worn at the moment by others. It is a matter of pure chance that those before them and not the ones worn by others have been relabelled. There is nothing different in the items (no faults or other defects).

It is like a sort of wink to consumers. Not only does the piece keep all the perceivable and unperceivable material qualities it had when it was a *MaxMara*, but its downgrading is a labelling as an item from a past collection. The question is, would consumers be indifferent between purchasing an *Intrend* piece of clothing and purchasing a counterfeited but indiscernible fake-*MaxMara* piece of clothing? We believe that they would prefer an *Intrend* item because of the aura of legitimacy, safety, and quality that is transmitted to the item by its having been a *MaxMara*. *Intrend* does not simply look like *MaxMara* (and that can be perceived), but it was a *MaxMara*: it is not labelled differently, but rather re-labelled.

Bearing a different label than an official *MaxMara* item is a real property that can be perceived as well,[3] and it also may alter the way in which a clothing item is valued or considered by a consumer. As the example shows, re-labelling and rebranding are part of a real ontological transformation of the clothing items, which thereby truly transition from being real *MaxMara* items to being real *Intrend* items. The transformation is not a merely subjective (conventional) stipulation. It is a transition that really takes place, as all the underlying branding, patenting, registering, accounting, and labelling show. That is the kind of transition that matters in a court of law. And that, too, is something perfectly clear for informed consumers: an *Intrend* item is an ex-*MaxMara* or *Marina Rinaldi* or *Pennyblack* item that has been re-labelled in certain ways. If I strip off the

Intrend label and stitch a *MaxMara* label on it, it does not thereby become a *MaxMara* item. But sensory perception certifies that it has all and only the features of a *MaxMara* piece. The case of *Intrend* shows that the ability to perceive certain traits of products plays an important role for consumers and that social reality is as relevant, for them, as all other sorts of reality, and not easier to bend.

5.3 Case Study: Facebook and the Cambridge Analytica Scandal (Reality and Subjectivity)

THE CASE

The handling of personal information by social networks represents one of the most complex cases in the context of digital communication tools. So much so that, in many cases, individuals are not aware of the amount of online information they have generated, information over which they have only partial control. The fundamental resource of social networks is the confidence granted to them by participating users; users need to be confident that social networks respect criteria of transparency and correctness as far as privacy is concerned.

The issue of safeguarding privacy on social networks generated worldwide discussion in March 2018 due to revelations by Christopher Wylie to the journalist Carole Cadwalladr in a published interview. The former employee of the consulting firm, Cambridge Analytica, explained how the British firm, created in 2013 by the American billionaire Robert Mercer, had illegally gathered and analysed data belonging to millions of registered Facebook users, mostly resident in the USA. The firm had been able to extract such information exploiting the entertainment app "Thisisyourdigitallife", which had been developed for academic purposes by the Russian–American psychology professor, Aleksandr Kogan. According to Christopher Wylie, the company's goal was a psychological profiling of social network users in order to create highly personalised communications to be used for political purposes.

In 2014, Facebook had made the decision to limit data and application exchange connected to its social network. Cambridge Analytica appears to have ignored this decision.

On 7 May 2017, an article published by Ms. Cadwalladr in the Observer (Callawadr 2017) reported certain practices implemented by Cambridge Analytica through Facebook. Although the contents of the article were denied both by Cambridge Analytica and by Facebook's UK head of privacy, Facebook decided to block data sharing with "Thisisyourdigitallife" and ordered Cambridge Analytica to delete all such data as it had collected through the app thus far. However, despite assurances to the contrary, Cambridge Analytica did not do so and retained the data. Facebook undertook no further action to verify or monitor the position.

Mr. Wylie's revelations were published on Saturday, 17 March 2018, in the New York Times (Rosenberg, Confessore, Cadwalladr 2018) and in the Guardian (Cadwalladr, Graham-Harrison 2018).

After an initial estimate of 50 million, the final number of spied-on profiles was calculated at about 87 million, of which 70 million belonged to US citizens. Facebook shares lost USD60 billion during the first two days after the scandal broke, with a 7% loss on the first Monday after the articles were published.

Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, was immediately summoned by the US Congress and admitted the firm's responsibilities, declaring his decision to implement more intensive controls to safeguard user privacy and in particular to control applications connected to the social network. Facebook was held responsible for failing to control procedures during the period in question and was sentenced by British authorities to pay a fine for breach of privacy and failure to protect personal data (Information Commissioner's Office ICO).

In the Spring of 2018, thanks in part to Zuckerberg's efforts to clarify matters publicly and to respond to allegations made by Congress, Facebook's position gradually improved from the first weeks of the crisis.

After notifying all users whose profiles had been involved in "Datagate", Facebook promoted an advertising campaign to encourage responsible use of online personal data and to draw attention to the phenomenon of fake news. The campaign was carried out by publishing posts on Facebook's platform and by using more traditional media, such as newspapers and other advertising forms. New updates were introduced in the platform to increase personal information safety, and a new European Provision concerning data privacy was accepted.

However, on 20 July 2018, the publication of updated financial reports for the first half of 2018 showed a fall in the number of Facebook subscribers in Europe. That fall represented a concrete threat to the survival and development of the platform, which, fundamentally, is based upon a network economy relying upon the number of users. That data influenced the company's stock market value and, in one day, Facebook shares fell almost 20%, from USD217 to USD175. Further confirmation of the crisis took place a few months later, when the Pew Research Centre measured a drop in confidence in the platform in the USA, as one in four American users said that they had uninstalled the Facebook app from their smartphones altogether, with a further 54% changing their privacy settings.

The incident has highlighted Facebook's vulnerability to cyberattacks and data leaks, heavily affecting its brand reputation. Zuckerberg's assurances about the creation of new data-safety systems might not suffice for future generations as guarantees regarding the handling of shared information.

At the end of March 2019, a year on from the scandal, Facebook shares had recovered about only half the losses it suffered during the second half of July 2018, and even that recovery was most probably only thanks to the success of its other offerings, including Instagram, WhatsApp, and Oculus. In the face of financial reports and of the ICO fine, as of 2019 Facebook's communication efforts had not yet managed to reconstitute its previous confidence capital.[4]

Does this case present a battle won by post-truth?

DISCUSSION

5.3.1 Facebook's Communication Strategy

The first thing which strikes one in the Facebook controversy is the communication strategy adopted by the company, which may be considered as significantly classic (as opposed to postmodernist): Facebook admitted that certain things had occurred, that what journalists had revealed was the case, and that the information about data harvesting was substantially accurate. There was almost no appeal to so-called alternative facts, alternative versions, different perspectives, the ungraspable status of online communications, and the like. The first reaction was to go back to what Williams (2002) considered as the pillars of truthfulness, that is, sincerity and accuracy: sincerity, in admitting that something had gone badly wrong, and a promise of accuracy, in undertaking to adopt a much more alert attitude towards data privacy.

The significance of this move cannot be overestimated, in particular as it comes from the very world giant that could be considered as one of the drivers of change in the conceptions of truth and reality in contemporary society. This may suggest, as we are inclined to believe, that only such a resort to truthfulness was expected to contain value losses and that markets would not be content with postmodernist strategies. We would like to suggest that, in the face of scandal, Facebook management became aware that the situation could produce a sort of sobering effect on its users: users became so accustomed to the Facebook environment that they progressively accepted its policies and submitted to its rules, but the scandal triggered a sense of exploitation and an instinct of rebellion against that system, perceived as insincere or even manipulative. Facebook reassured consumers and markets of its allegiance to the classical virtues of truthfulness, in order not to be perceived as a sort of social-networking Matrix, creating a parallel postmodernist world in which such values do not hold any more, and in which truth coincides with the strongest opinion (cf. Ferraris 2012).

That seems to suggest that consumers and markets are not (and were not considered to be) postmodernist agents, believing that there are no facts of the matter, and that 'fact', 'reality', and 'truth' are but interpretation-relative

notions, as many marketing positions have suggested them to be. Reference to truth and reality did not emerge as some cultural accident, which can be easily superseded by other frameworks or values, such as reference to a narrative, to cultural identity, to subjective experience, etc. And that is so much the case that even the digital champion of postmodernist perspectivism and post-truth felt the need to plead allegiance to the values of truthfulness in order to avoid being identified as a Behemoth of postmodernist manipulation. In fact, from the moment the scandal broke out, Facebook communicated its intention to promote the value of accuracy, to control the spreading of fake news, and, more recently, to shut down accounts used to spread misinformation. The past years have witnessed, instead, the flourishing of information offerings related to fact-checking on numerous online and printed information products.

5.3.2 Data Leaks and Social Reality

When updated reports were published, Facebook shares lost a significant amount of value. And this indicates that, on the one hand, Facebook's unprecedented communicative power did not suffice to settle the issue. On the other hand, it can be interpreted as a sign that markets, as well, did not "buy" Facebook's reassurances and estimated that the damage to the brand image had been larger than what Facebook wanted to admit. Markets did not base their evaluation upon promises that measures would be taken and that the system would be reformed but relied heavily upon available data related to the heavy drop in the number of users.

The Facebook controversy proves that markets can be severe fact-checkers, and that they may take consumers themselves to be much less postmodernist than they have been portrayed to be. Consumers appear to be concerned about what is going on in the world, what is happening to the data they produce, what is done to avoid leaks and abuses; and markets seem to be aware of that in a pretty much straightforward and classical sense.

Another aspect of the Facebook scandal that ought not to be underestimated is the one related to the reality and value of personal information and data produced by users on social networks (Ferraris 2014c). Consumers did not only feel cheated, because confidential information about them was transmitted to third parties, without asking for their permission; they also became more acutely aware of the value of that information—they felt exploited; something valuable generated by them, and belonging to them (at least in part), had been illegally extracted from them and sold for money, without remunerating them in any way. That led to widespread mistrust and animosity towards Facebook and to the closing of many accounts.

The awareness of such massively user-produced information, and of its enormous market value, has generated indignation. That aspect plays a

very important role: information is as real as clothing and cattle, and it can be produced, processed, traded, purchased, etc. Social reality is not a mere matter of appearances, perspectives, conventions, illusions, and the like: social media giants teach us that it is so real and solid that it can be purchased and sold just like anything else. And that is a lesson which we can learn from the very episode of the listing of Facebook on the stock exchange. In order to understand the reality and value of information, relationships, opinions, attitudes, and so forth, it is not enough any more to make generic reference to conventions and interpretations: only an accurate study of these social entities can do justice to the broader and broader phenomenon of information and knowledge trade. In a nutshell, one of the things consumers were angry about is that data about them are generated by them, are real, and are valuable. That is a revealing set of realist positions about social media information. The mishandling of information was perceived not only as a violation of privacy but a swindle as well.

5.3.3 Data and Segmentation

Not the Facebook scandal proper, but the facts underlying it, contain another interesting realist morale: segmentation is far from dead. Postmodernist marketing grew dissatisfied with traditional segmentation strategies, based upon income, sex, gender, age, etc., and saluted the end of segmentation in the liquid postmodernist world. However, as we can appreciate from the Facebook story too, this is only half of the tale: traditional segmentation may be moribund, because society has deeply changed, but segmentation *tout court* is not. And that is precisely what the Cambridge Analytica scandal was all about: exploitation of user-generated information for the development of highly specific and highly powerful user profiles that could be employed to tailor value proposals to their expected preferences, attitudes, and sensibilities. Once more, Postmodernism seems to have mistaken the end of a certain real structure (a certain social order, inherited from the nineteenth and early twentieth century) with the end of real social structures *tout court* (the end of real social patterns underlying consumer behaviour).

What the Facebook/Cambridge Analytica scandal reveals is that consumer segments are much more complicated and fluid than they used to be, but also that, thanks to user-generated information, their preferences and attitudes can be modelled in much more precise and powerful ways than they used to be in the heydays of modernist segmentation. And that is not mere speculation: it is precisely what firms such as Cambridge Analytica are all about and what makes them so palatable to different agents, including political ones.

What was interpreted as the triumph of post-truth and the end of reality (the political and economic scandal related to Facebook and Cambridge

Analytica and their relevance to political elections) can, in fact, be interpreted in opposite terms: Facebook lost part of its user confidence and value, it committed to much more accurate fact-checking and account-checking, markets punished it anyway, because users partially lost confidence in it. Users became more aware of a real ontological layer of the world, consisting of the information they generate, and of its market value, and that value had in fact been traded as a real product to produce *ad hoc* market segmentations and tailor value offerings to consumers, in this case, coinciding with segments of actual or potential voters.

5.4 Case Study: Is Venice Inauthentic and Fake? (Reality and Experience)

THE CASE

A 16 March 2003 article published in the New York Times highlighted the tourist invasion of Venice, one of the most famous brands worldwide. In that year, there were about 15 million presences in the city. A 13 June 2006 Financial Times article announced the threat of a complete disappearance of Venetians, who were constantly diminishing in number. Eventually, tourist monoculture invited more observers to define Venice as a Disneyland, an unreal and inauthentic city.

In 2018 presences in Venice reached 37 million, a constantly increasing figure. Has the city, therefore, stopped being authentic? In their book on authenticity,Gilmore and Pine (2007) report the opinion of those wondering whether the authentic Venice is the one on the lagoon in Italy or the Venetian hotel and casino in Las Vegas. The legitimacy of that question derives from the conception of authenticity expressed by them, according to which it is defined only negatively.

What does not belong to a single person is not authentic: modifying individual choices to respect norms generates lack of authenticity. What is submitted to machinery is not authentic: altering things with machines generates lack of authenticity. What is contaminated by money is inauthentic: commercialisation is an activity that generates lack of authenticity. Machines and money are considered to be artificial social creations. According to Gilmore and Pine, none of what firms propose is authentic: everything is artificial and utterly fake, because it has been produced by machines and for profit. Venice is above the sea level thanks to dikes and other canalisation techniques and maintenance. Hence it is artificial and inauthentic, exactly like the Venetian hotel in Las Vegas.

The high number of tourists leads many Venetian activities to revolve around tourism; since everything that becomes commercial also becomes inauthentic, the city itself, pervaded by tourism, becomes inauthentic. Commercial activities related to tourism diminish the value of authenticity perceived by tourists. According to Gilmore and Pine, there are

no inauthentic experiences, because all experiences take place within us. That means that individuals remain free to judge subjectively commercial offerings as authentic or inauthentic.

That leads to a paradox. Every commercial offering is ontologically fake and inauthentic, but that product could be "phenomenologically" experienced as authentic.

Firms may profit by that paradox, according to Gilmore and Pine, by presenting their offerings (that are ex hypothesi inauthentic) as authentic.

Consumers seek authenticity and try to obtain it. Consumers, therefore, may perceive many intrinsically inauthentic offerings in Venice as authentic. This leads to an invitation to express commercial offerings as authentic. Following that line of argument, one may venture to wish that Venice completes its transition towards becoming a totally touristic and commercial destination, thereby becoming a global postmodernist icon, universal and belonging to anyone, not only to its residents.

The thesis is puzzling. Why are shops and commercial activities located in hidden corners typically perceived as authentic, whereas the ones in the tourist core of the city are not? Does the authenticity paradox apply only to a part of the city?

Can there still be a theory of authenticity within the ambit of Postmodernism?

DISCUSSION

5.4.1 It's Paradox Time!

As we have seen here, the concept of authenticity has proven to be a crucial theoretical tool for marketing theory and practice, and the marketing community is particularly indebted to Experiential Marketing for its work on the relevance and fruitfulness of this theme. Indeed, few could seriously question that issues of authenticity are of the utmost relevance in contemporary consumer behaviour and in the corresponding marketing strategies. However, our discussion of EM has shown that, in order for a consumer to experience something as authentic, genuine attrition with an independent reality must be part of that experience.

As to the case in point, on the one hand, we have the feeling that Venice (along with many other places) is losing, or has lost, part of its authenticity, that it is becoming, or has become, an inauthentic place, a fake place. On the other hand, we have the correlatively subjective intuition that one may have an inauthentic experience, when visiting Venice. Venice is, or risks becoming, an inauthentic place, in which many—if not most—visitors have inauthentic experiences. We intend to acknowledge these intuitions, while comparing the fruitfulness of alternative models with respect to them.[5]

Gilmore and Pine (2007) explicitly address objective and subjective aspects of authenticity and make the following series of claims:

i. authenticity is highly valuable for consumers;
ii. authenticity is reality;
iii. nothing is real (postmodernist assumption);
iv. nothing is authentic (from ii. and iii.);

A conclusion that may be drawn from this series of claims is that nothing can legitimately satisfy consumers' search for authenticity, and that any such search is doomed to remain frustrated. However, in order to rescue their favourite notion, Gilmore and Pine highlight the distinction between what they call "phenomenological" and "ontological" authenticity, and claim that:

v. "perception"[6] is, *qua* subjective experience, undisputable (assumption);
vi. something (anything!) unreal, inauthentic, can be subjectively experienced by someone as real, authentic[7] (from v.);

In fact, they go further than this and claim that:

vii. the same thing can be experienced as authentic by someone and as inauthentic by someone else (from v. + the undisputed fact that different individuals have different "perceptions").

There is nothing against which it would make sense to test someone's experience of something as authentic or someone else's experience of it as inauthentic.[8] Gilmore and Pine also provide a tentative framework for subjective perceptions of authenticity by suggesting that someone's subjective experiencing of certain things as authentic or inauthentic ultimately rests upon their self-image.

In our discussion of the Venice case, we shall agree with Gilmore and Pine on (i.) and (ii.) but disagree with them on (iii.) and, hence, shall not find (iv.) a compelling conclusion at all. We shall, therefore, point out that the disputable assumption (v.) is not necessary to rescue the notion of authenticity (rather the opposite) and that the equally disputable distinction made in (vi.) is not necessary either. (vii.) will be confirmed, but lose much of its bite. If we take a close look at the case in point, the inconsistencies highlighted here, with respect to their allegiance to postmodernist antirealism, tend to produce theoretical paradoxes as well as very concrete predicaments.

5.4.2 Get a Grip

Gilmore and Pine's approach seems to be too broad to accommodate our intuitions. If we apply their line of argument, we have to tackle the

overgeneralisation that not only Venice or places sharing certain features with Venice, but every town on earth is, has been, and always will be, ontologically fake, inauthentic. This is confusing, because concepts are supposed to provide some theoretical and practical guidance by distinguishing relevant cases. For instance, the concept of authenticity is perhaps supposed to help us understand why certain groups of tourists tend to avoid certain destinations, certain urban areas, certain kinds of accommodations, why they tend to prefer certain boroughs to others, why they appreciate certain restaurants more than others, why they tend to review certain attractions in certain loosely systematic ways, and so forth. If everything is inauthentic, every town is inauthentic; but if every town is as inauthentic, every town is as authentic as it could ever be.

Overgeneralisation does not coincide with, but tends to produce, another issue: lack of theoretical grip. Lack of grip typically emerges when we try to put an overgeneralisation to work to make sense of even such elementary cases as comparison and change. For instance, if everything is inauthentic, then a part of Venice that has remained unaffected by mass tourism is as inauthentic as a part that has been taken over by souvenir stands and retailers of gadgets that can be found in any other touristic town.

If everything is inauthentic, then a family run *trattoria* in a seventeenth-century building, offering traditional recipes and using local products, will remain as (in)authentic as it ever was if it is purchased by a multinational corporation and transformed into a fast-food restaurant, selling globally standardised food, made with the same products and ingredients to be found in any other restaurant of the same chain, worldwide. That is hard to take, too.

When we introduce a concept or bring a known one to bear upon a certain situation, we expect that concept to do some work. And we are convinced that the concept of authenticity can do good theoretical and practical work. The problem is that postmodernist assumptions have made Gilmore and Pine's notion of authenticity too smooth to get a grip of something with.

We want "authentic" to do some work in articulating our opinion that our formerly favourite restaurant is not as authentic as it used to be, that our favourite Venetian borough is not as authentic it used to be, and even that our beloved town, Venice, is not any more as authentic as it used to be. Postmodernist irony—in its technical Rortyan sense of taking distance from the very concepts one is using, by claiming that there is nothing out there really corresponding to them—leaves us with a night in which all cows are black: an undistinguished scenario in which we are unable to intelligibly draw a pressing distinction between an authentic Venetian recipe and a globalised fast-food take-away sandwich, between an authentic Venetian interior and some standardised international design, between an authentic Venetian tradition and some fake folklore.

How can we do that, if nothing, nothing at all, is really authentic, and if—conversely—everything is as authentic as it ever could be? Mass tourism, a massive drop in the number of residents of the historical centre, the massive transformation of homes into hotels or tourist accommodations, the disappearance of local retail shops and traditional economic activities, such as various forms of craftsmanship, the massive substitution of globalised gadget shops and cheap souvenirs for local retail shops and commercial activities related to a resident population: all these well-known phenomena seem *not* to alter the authenticity of Venice at all, since Venice is, *ex hypothesi* inauthentic, unreal, and since all authenticity is merely subjective, "perceived", authenticity.

We are thus confronted with the first aspect of the paradox: because nothing really is authentic:

- Venice is neither more nor less authentic than other places (say, Naples or Istanbul);
- no part of Venice is more authentic than another part;
- Venice is not becoming any more inauthentic than it ever was;
- no political, legal, or entrepreneurial action is required in order to preserve or enhance the authenticity of Venice;
- there is no real pattern out there which determines the rapid loss of authenticity of Venice and other places in the world that are (say) systematically exposed to a rapid growth of mass tourism (e.g. Barcelona, Carcassonne, Malaga, Santorini). For instance, there is no real pattern out there correlating mass tourism (or low-cost flights, the rapid growth of a new global middle class eager to visit certain parts of the world, etc.) and a loss of authenticity of many places that are also tourist destinations.

5.4.3 Inventing Authenticity?

Up to this point, we have highlighted quite general and abstract shortcomings of the thesis that authenticity is a merely subjective aspect of experiences and not of things themselves. We would now like to point out some more concrete deficiencies that clash not only with intuitions and robust assumptions but also with widespread practices, most notably with well-known operational guidelines and theoretical paradigms used by intergovernmental institutions, such as, for instance, UNESCO and UNWTO.

We feel that Venice has lost part of its authenticity, that it is less authentic than other Italian towns, for instance, Genoa, Palermo, or Naples. We feel that certain parts of Venice are still authentic or more authentic than others. We feel that mass tourism has a lot to do with the loss of authenticity of Venice, and that many other cities, which are also tourist destinations, are undergoing a similar loss of authenticity; and that something

can be done to prevent Venice from losing its authenticity. We also know that our intuitions are in tune with widespread and highly institutionalised uses of the concept of authenticity, in well-known international contexts, in which such notion plays a crucial role in orienting important political and cultural decisions. For instance, "Venice and Its Lagoon" has entered UNESCO's World Heritage List in the second half of the 1980s.

Amongst the conditions that a cultural property (like "Venice and Its Lagoon") must meet, in order to be deemed of "Outstanding Universal Value", and hence be inscribed on the World Heritage List, there is authenticity, which features in a number of official UNESCO documents: the so-called Nara document, various versions of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the 1972 Convention for the Protection of the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage, various manuals for the preparation and submission of candidatures of properties to be inscribed on the World Heritage List, etc. In all those documents, the concept of authenticity is spelled out in its meaning and partially operationalised through a number of instructions and indications in order to be applied to contexts as heterogeneous as an ancient Japanese temple, the Sydney Opera House, a Punic burial site, and a Chilean mining area.

If we come to the case of Venice, we find that ICOMOS and UNESCO have issued reports and formal recommendations regarding the authenticity of Venice and its Lagoon, considered as a World Heritage property. Those documents have pointed at specific and concrete threats posed by different factors to the authenticity (and other features, such as integrity) of that World Heritage property. The concept of authenticity plays a crucial role in the preparation of a World Heritage property submission, in its examination by consulting bodies (ICOMOS, for instance), in its inscription on the World Heritage List, but also in a site management system, in periodic reports about its state, and in recommendations and warnings about it. In particularly delicate cases, loss of authenticity can lead the World Heritage Committee to inscribe properties on the List of World Heritage in Danger or even to erase them from the World Heritage List.

Cities like Dresden, Liverpool, Vienna have been inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger, or deleted from the World Heritage List, because of concrete issues related to the concepts of authenticity and integrity. Official reports and recommendations about the state of Venice and Its Lagoon as a World Heritage property have been produced by ICOMOS, by Italian authorities, and by UNESCO itself:

> The Mission noted that the dramatic increase of the number of tourists, followed by a consequently proportional reconversion of buildings into spaces for persons coming from outside on one hand, the enormous decrease of the population on the islands on the other hand are alerting indicators for the irreversible loss of this essential value of authenticity. The given information showed how the normal

> inhabitation has become very difficult already today; the requirement of "use and function" as an important part of authenticity of the site is threatened.[9]

In these reports, loss of authenticity is dealt with as a concrete, objective feature of the site and in particular as a feature threatened by mass tourism and related phenomena. Measures to stop loss of authenticity are also suggested and recommended. Diagnoses and recommendations focus upon such real patterns as the increase in the number of tourists, the reconversion of buildings into spaces for persons coming from outside, the enormous decrease of the population on the islands, as leading to an "irreversible loss of . . . authenticity". It is hard to look away from such evidence and insist that 'authenticity' in this context is a term of art for conservation experts with no relation to the ordinary concept of authenticity, or to claim that ICOMOS simply got it all wrong, and that nothing can change the authenticity of Venice, because nothing really is ontologically authentic, or even that, perhaps, all we need to do to preserve the authenticity of Venice and Its Lagoon is to attempt to perceive it differently: after all, perceived authenticity (what they call "phenomenological authenticity", leaving aside the fact that phenomenology investigates the consistent manifestation of reality, not subjective whims) is the only available authenticity, according to Gilmore and Pine.

A perspective that cannot accommodate these intuitions about the reality of authenticity, its real—or "ontological", as opposed to merely subjective or "phenomenological"—status, cannot be considered as fully satisfactory, because it is unable to capture the actual use of the concept in ordinary and institutional contexts. And it would be futile to object that each discipline—conservation, marketing, management, philosophy—has its own concept of authenticity, because we have plenty of evidence that there is a great amount of overlap. In fact, excessive touristification and loss of local population are amongst the typical features we find in negative reviews of tourist destinations, and their opposites are amongst the most typical remarks we find associated with the labelling of something as authentic (authentic as undiscovered, uncompromising, unpolished, original, untouched, genuine, spontaneous, vivid, etc.).

It should be noted that UNESCO opened a debate on authenticity in order to emancipate that concept from its Eurocentric background: that debate produced a number of important reference points, which revolve around the notions of credibility and truthfulness, but also include design, materials, substance, use, function, traditions, spirit, and feeling, most of which cannot be reduced to subjective experiences.

5.4.4 Encountering Authenticity

One last aspect ought to be taken into account when discussing the issue of authenticity, and it is the issue of the relation between the objective—or

even objectual—features that accompany it, and the subjective experience of something as authentic. Authenticity, we have highlighted, is a matter not only of reality but also of experience: the topic of authenticity is largely derived from autobiographic texts and reflective attitudes. Authenticity is—also etymologically—a matter of doing things oneself, or one's way. In that sense, Gilmore and Pine's association of authenticity not with how things actually are, but with how they are experienced to be, is not entirely besides the point. However, it ought to be noted that authenticity, like every other concept, is employed in certain contexts and with certain rules, and those contexts and rules outline at least part of its meaning. If we take the concepts of being in pain, or being in love, or being happy, we may have to recognise that there is a very important aspect of those concepts that is related to the way it subjectively feels to be in the corresponding states: one does not simply say that one's gums are irritated, one may have to add that one's teeth are aching; one does not say that a certain person is sweet and understanding, one may add that one is in love with that person. And the same counts for being happy.

It does not seem to us that the concept of authenticity works that way: when we say that a certain Venetian *bacaro* has an authentic atmosphere, that via Garibaldi still retains its authenticity, or that *spaghetti alla Bolognese* is not an authentic Venetian recipe (or an Italian one, for that matter), we are not expressing something about the way we feel or experience those things. Saying that my irritated gums ache is expressing something about the way I subjectively experience their being irritated; saying I am in love with a person is saying something about the way I experience that person and being with them. And saying that I like Cannaregio is saying something about how I subjectively experience its features or being in that borough. But saying that a certain bar, or borough, or recipe, or even whole town, is authentic does not really seem to be stating something about the way the speaker experiences that place. In fact, one can contradict someone claiming that gondoliers singing "*O Sole mio*" are authentic by pointing out that "*O Sole mio*" is a Neapolitan song, not a Venetian one. Whereas it would be much stranger to contradict someone saying they simply like or enjoy gondoliers singing "*O Sole mio*".

The reason why certain tourists tend to avoid visiting certain parts of Venice (Paris, Rome, Amsterdam, Barcelona . . .) during certain periods is systematically related to the circumstance that there is a correlation between one's feeling that one is having an authentic experience and the feeling that what one is experiencing is itself authentic. It is hard to have an authentic experience of buying clichéd souvenirs made on the other side of the world in a place where one would not encounter one local inhabitant and while being surrounded only by tourists.

The concept of authenticity is not exclusively used in expressions and exclamations, but it is used in judgements, statements, assessments, reviews, evaluations. In fact, anyone who lives in Venice has been asked

about where to find authentic corners of town, and they have answered that question trying to come up with areas of town that share certain typical features. Similar experiences have occurred to inhabitants of London, Paris, Rome, and so forth.

The point is that it is not only intergovernmental agencies like UNESCO that talk about authenticity in objective terms—so do we, while describing our discovery of a hidden *trattoria* in a quiet Venetian lane: we describe the location, the furniture, the menu, the way its staff looked, their manners, the paintings on the walls.

5.4.5 The Asperities of Authenticity

If we look at the issue of authenticity with respect to Venice, we find a multifaceted phenomenon that has robustly objective features intertwined with their subjective counterparts. Authenticity and its loss are real features of Venice and its lagoon, and they are experienced as such by different people. Subjective experiences of these objective features may be shared by tourists as well as by residents: a Venetian resident and a tourist both enjoy having a coffee in an authentic Venetian *pasticceria*, although the resident may be concerned or disappointed about finding many tourists in it, and the tourist might not like the way the Venetian resident looks at her or him.

If we look at the issue of authenticity with respect to Venice, and attempt to make sense of the different aspects related to tourism, marketing, UNESCO concerns and recommendations, complaints voiced by residents, and the like, we may find a thread in an answer to a kind of ontological question: what is Venice? What kind of entity is it? We intend to suggest that the ontological level can be a good conceptual framework to address the issue of the authenticity of Venice.

What is Venice, then? Venice is many things, but a good approximation would be to say that it is fundamentally a town. And if we follow, as we do, Gilmore and Pine, in their equation of authenticity with reality, we can ask a further question: what makes a town a real town?

A real, authentic town can be distinguished from something that looks or appears like a town but really isn't one by the fact that a town is inhabited by people who typically reside there: they are born there, they grow up there, they work there, they have all sorts of relations there. And the buildings of a real town are different from the ones of something that looks like one but isn't, because they are used by the town's inhabitants for the set of functions and activities that are correlated to that town's being inhabited (accommodation, socialisation, economic exchange, politics, sport, entertainment, and so forth).

The same counts for large-scale aspects, such as urban planning and structure, with broad features such as administrative districts, religious buildings, educational facilities, sport facilities, hospitals (if present),

recreational areas, logistics, spaces for socialisation, and so forth. An authentic town is a town in which, for instance, buildings, by and large, are used by its inhabitants to perform the activities correlated to their living together (working, studying, socialising, recreation, political functions, and so forth). Correlatively, an authentic area of town is an area in which what goes on in shops, restaurants, residential buildings, parks is related to the typical functions associated with that area of town being inhabited by people.

An authentic town square is not simply a square which has not been reconstructed without interest in restoration principles; rather, it is used for the typical functions associated with its being a town square. For instance, piazza San Marco may raise more than one issue with respect to its being authentic, because it is no longer used by Venetians themselves as a square: Venetians do not meet in piazza San Marco, do not gather there, do not even pass by there any more. In fact, the borough of San Marco has lost many residents, and almost all residential buildings, shops, and in general what goes on in its lanes and alleyways is a response to mass tourism. Hence, one could say that piazza San Marco is not a real or authentic square any more, and that San Marco borough is no longer a real or authentic Venetian borough. Hence, a person who visits piazza San Marco may have a subjective experience of the piazza as not being authentic. And that experience may be in fact correct. The same counts for a coffee bar where no Venetian would ever set foot, because they do not serve products a Venetian may like or because of a number of other features, such as furniture, price, layout, location, position, staff, opening times, and the like.

In the first section we introduced the relevance of social ontology and its centrality in a reversal of the postmodernist approach: not only do we reject the *cliché* that all purported reality is but a mere correlate of contingent perspectives; we reject the idea that all social reality is, too, and intend to draw attention to the fruitfulness of social ontology, that is, of the systematic study of the ontological structure of social entities. My experiencing piazza San Marco on a Summer day as an inauthentic square, my having a feeling that my experience in that square is inauthentic—for instance, because of the absence of any residents except me, because of the percentage of persons taking photographs, because of the lack of shops and activities dedicated to people who live in town—is not a mere "phenomenological" fact, in Gilmore and Pine's (2007) sense of the word. It does not depend upon my self-image, whatever that might be. It depends upon what is really going on in that square and around it. And, indeed, what I am experiencing can be shared with others and is shared by many others with very different self-images, as well as by transnational institutions such as UNESCO.

Authenticity is a matter of reality, and when it comes to places that are tourist destinations, its issue ends up revolving around the very real and

concrete question whether something is shaped by its function as a part of a certain town (a restaurant where Venetians go, a bar where Venetians take coffee, a borough where you see Venetian children going to school in the morning and playing in squares in the afternoon). A similar issue may be raised about religious buildings: if residents abandon a town, then churches, synagogues, and other religious buildings tend to be reduced, *de facto*, to possible tourist attractions or to spaces for events or exhibitions. This has been the fate of some Venetian churches.

We do not intend to privilege the role of the past in defining what counts as authentic or real (neither does UNESCO, by the way), but rather the role of autonomy: we tend to experience something as authentic when we notice that it is the way it is, not as the result of adjusting to our presence but rather out of some independent tendency. Authenticity is the possibility of encounter. We do not experience it as authentic if we notice that it is disingenuous, contrived, phony, fake (these are the words used by Gilmore and Pine). But the two aspects are related, especially in the case of Venice and of tourist destinations in general: Venice is losing Venetians and is being touristified through and through; this leads to a loss of authenticity, in terms of what is going on in the city being an adjustment to the pressure of mass tourism rather than to the demands of the residents' urban life. That leads to a loss of authenticity not only of the city itself, as remarked upon by UNESCO, but also of the experience of tourists, who perceive (take) what surrounds them as inauthentic, that is, as a response to them as tourists. In order for authentic experience to take place, genuine encounters, attritions, episodes ought to be possible. In a city dominated by mass tourism, even the simplest conversation on the street, even asking the way to a museum, may be deprived of any unpredictability and spontaneity. Real lack of authenticity is the objective counterpart of the subjective perception of a lack of authenticity. That, as we have shown, cannot be reduced to a merely subjective perspective but depends upon real social patterns that can be captured by social ontology.

5.5 Case Study: Food Farming Quality Certifications (Reality and Value)

THE CASE

Over recent decades, the attitude of consumers of food farming products in the European Union has changed. In particular, consumers have tended to shift their attention from features of the food itself to the ways in which it is produced and processed, that is, from features which can be observed before consumption (e.g. the physical size of fruit, its imperfections, the amount of fat in ham, etc.), and from features which can be experienced during consumption (the taste of a cherry, the freshness of a

pastry product), to trust features which cannot be evaluated, even after consumption (the use of GMO, the use of additives, for example).

This trend has led to greater complexity in the evaluation of product features and hence a growing demand for information and guarantees.

Responses from sources of information have been diverse, at times showing significant overlap, at other times expressing contradictory positions, thus making the message difficult to decode.

Many features of the trust kind have, therefore, become critical, and information sources have become increasingly dissimilar. If we add further aspects, such as information being a public asset, information having relevance to health concerns, the fragmentation of food farming offerings, which prevents most producers from effectively intervening in markets—we ought to conclude that public regulations concerning food farming products appear to be justified.

Public interventions regulate systems which certify quality and, more generally, the flow of information to consumers.

However, the current state of public interventions in matters of certification and regulation of information about food farming products appears to be only partially effective.

What are the weakening factors with respect to the effectiveness of the main forms of quality certification of food farming products in Italy?

1. *The continuing emergence of new brands and new logos dilutes the message contained in each of them with respect to the background noise of communications.*
2. *Some forms of certification differ from each other subtly, and the differentiating elements are not immediately and simply comprehensible to the majority of consumers; for instance, the differences between organic products (bio) and those from farms practising integrated pest management.*

Another example concerns PDO and PGI products. PDO certification is granted to products whose characteristics are essentially or exclusively due to the territory from which they come, whereas PGI certification is granted to products for which a certain feature or reputation can be ascribed to that territory.

3. *The use made by some types of certification contributes to generating confusion and uncertainty amongst consumers.*

Council Regulation (EEC) No 2081/92 envisages the possibility of certificating the existence of more or less intensive ties between products and territories: in particular, PDO represents the highest level of correlation between quality and territory. However, in reality we find very different

situations, including PDO products made with extraterritorial materials or with materials from territories which are so vast and heterogeneous that they cannot positively and unequivocally influence the quality of products made with them. In those situations, a PGI certification will more usually be given.

For instance, PDO Parma ham and PDO San Daniele ham are produced with pork thighs from many different regions. A similar situation pertains with PDO French Roquefort cheese, whose raw materials come from far beyond its homonymous region. On the other hand, in 95% of cases the entire production cycle of PDO Pecorino Romano takes place in Sardinia.

This series of situations generates problems for consumers in understanding the true informational content of the guarantee offered by such certification systems. Indeed, the effectiveness of each PDO depends upon the reputation of the whole system of PDOs, while, in turn, the system's reputation depends upon the reliability and credibility of each PDO. It is evident that the existence of PDOs which are relevant exceptions to the general rule makes the success of certifications more uncertain.

4. *A further problematic aspect concerns the complexity and multiplicity of features envisaged by the guarantee. Such complexity tends to improve the overall product quality, but it makes the relative relevance of the different guaranteed elements less evident to consumers. For instance, sometimes a guarantee that the food is healthy appears side by side with a guarantee concerning the well-being of the animals involved. Guarantees regarding animal welfare have indirect and uncertain effects upon a product's potential healthiness for consumers, whereas they have strong ethical relevance which may nevertheless not be so important for consumers looking for food produced without using synthetic chemicals.*
5. *There are cases in which only a small percentage of a product from an area protected by a denomination is actually certificated. However, obtaining a PDO certification means powerful media attention on the product and its territory, whose positive effects reverberate upon the whole production, whether certificated or not.*

Also, that situation may contribute to diluting the significance of a certification and the boundaries between certified and non-certified products. And indeed, for Italian wines, an unacceptably low level in the use of the DOCG denomination (a subspecies of the EU PDO appellation applying to wines) leads to a revocation of that certification.

6. *The presence in markets of private brands created by producers and suppliers represents an element of possible weakening of public certifications.*

Typically, those producers who use legal certifications operate on a small scale and do not reach the levels of investments necessary to reach significant discounts in the purchase of advertisement. Large producers have a much stronger advertising presence and hence a much greater market power.

Large-scale producers are not, moreover, subject to constraints regarding the features to be guaranteed and communicated (except for the constraints of commercial and industrial laws), and hence they are in a position to formulate simpler and more effective—although more undetermined—messages guaranteeing their products.

For instance, the reassuring message of the food retailer Despar about its S-Budget brand ("S-Budget is a 'lowest price' line, but its quality is no lower than any other, and it is guaranteed by the controls carried out by Despar on the whole production chain") remains simple and non-specific but can be more effective compared to the messages conveyed by public certifications, which are more constrained, more difficult to decipher, and are disseminated to consumers using the lowest of budgets.

7. *Finally, sometimes a large-scale industrial firm will acquire a firm operating in an area covered by a particular denomination procedural guideline. Large-scale firms enjoy advantages of scale, finance, and technology which are not accessible to small producers. In time, they can come to acquire a high market share of the product and affect the local production network by devaluing the handmade, traditional, or typical contents of the production area.*[10]

Can a realist perspective help clarify the role—for marketing—of the features recognised by food appellations?

DISCUSSION

5.5.1 A False Friend?

The first temptation researchers are confronted with, when addressing the topic of food farming certifications, is the constructionist one (Arce and Marsden 1993; Lyons and Lockie 2001). As children of the postmodernist era, and of the poststructuralist one in particular, we feel inclined to interpret the phenomenon of appellations and certifications in what we could deem 'Foucauldian' terms. Isn't the case of public denominations and certifications a classical one for a Foucauldian toolkit? We have all the actors of the Foucauldian theatre on stage:

- states (or even international organisations), attempting to regulate what takes place within their borders;

- functionaries elaborating, formalising, and applying a professional discourse for that purpose;
- institutionalised procedures and techniques to be implemented to enforce a certain kind of denominations;
- terminology, taxonomising and providing a normative structure.

The upshot of constructionist approaches is usually that what we are dealing with is deeply contingent, that is, that classifications and appellations may not have emerged at all, had circumstances been different, but, even more, that completely different—and possibly incompatible—classifications may have been introduced by institutions and their specialists, had they been motivated by different interests. Hence, existing classifications are but arbitrary stipulations, sustained by contingent discourses enforced by institutions: organic food is not simply certified as being organic by certifications but exists thanks to them; there exists in fact no such thing as organic food out there but only a cluster of different products held together by a very strong social convention that produces the corresponding linguistic and conceptual categories on one side, the relevant legal and technical practices on the other, and the very language and communication surrounding them.

The postmodernist approach to social phenomena is often rooted in this fundamental attitude: all reality is socially constructed, and the process of social construction takes place by articulating discourses, producing categories, proposing labels, sustaining such classification through professional functionaries and formalised procedures. If such a strategy can be applied to such phenomena as mental illnesses, nations, genders (Hacking 1999), why not apply it to a case which looks exemplary: one in which institutions explicitly declare the disciplinary nature of their undertaking?

The post-Foucauldian approach is not the only possible postmodernist one, but it is perhaps the best candidate for the occasion. What all postmodernist approaches would tend to share is an insistence upon the conventional nature of appellations, a refusal to fall prey to forms of essentialism, that is, of mistaking what they take to be linguistic and social conventions for pre-existing and independent kinds, and upholding the view that whatever PDO, PGI, and other products are is only "real" (in brackets) within a specific conceptual framework and not out there.

5.5.2 True . . . to Some Extent

What the social constructivists are right about, in our opinion, is the contingency of the denominations and of their certifications. It is true that other appellations may have been introduced, and other certifications proposed, instead of the actual ones. It would even have been possible for no denomination or certification ever to have been introduced at all, had social, institutional, and political circumstances been different. And, of course, appellations

and certifications may drastically change in the future: for instance, new appellations may appear, others may be abolished, others may change or merge, and so forth. We believe that no realist ought to venture to deny that.

Another thing Postmodernists would be right about is that the existence of such appellations and certifications rests upon concrete social practices and habits. In order to understand what (PDO) Parma Ham is, we have to resort not only to the physical or chemical properties of the items of that product but also to what farmers, animal feed producers, consortiums, marketers, retailers, and of course consumers, do. Ham, wine, cheese, and many other things would not exist if human beings did not exist or had different habits or tastes, for the simple reason that they are products, that is, artefacts. But a postmodernist approach would make a mistake, if it suggested that being a product means existing solely as a matter of convention. It is our conviction that Roquefort cheese, San Daniele ham, Bourgogne wine, and the like exist out there in the same world in which sparrows and squirrels exist.

5.5.3 (Not) A Matter of Conventions

In addressing the topic of appellations and certifications of quality, the first step a realist ought to take is to remind everyone that, for every being, there is a big difference between its causally depending upon the existence of human conventions and practices and having a merely conventional or perspective-relative status: as we have seen, houses causally depend upon such conventions for their existence, but their existence is not a mere convention—otherwise rain, which does not care much about humans and their conventions, would run right through their merely conventionally existing roofs. Industrial pollution causally depends upon such human habits and conventions, too, but its existence is, unfortunately, very real and also impacts upon species that know nothing about human conventions. If we acknowledge the distinction between causal dependence upon social conventions and conventional existence, we are in a position to appreciate one of the most significant aspects of the phenomenon we are considering, namely the real existence of products of all kinds, including, of course, food farming products.

Food farming products, such as wines, cheeses, hams, but of course also vegetables, tomatoes, and so forth exist in the real world, just like anything else, in a complex spectrum that goes from water itself, that is already present in nature, but is analysed, processed, bottled, labelled, shipped, distributed, advertised as a product, to smoked salmon, deep-frozen lasagne, and the like.

5.5.4 Beyond Monadic Properties

Another important aspect that a realist should immediately point out, in order to discuss the case of food farming denominations and classifications,

is that it would be reductive to privilege monadic properties, when considering entities of all sorts: for instance, it would be wrong to privilege Paul's being blond over his being John's brother. We tend to ascribe full reality to monadic properties—like a ham's having a certain colour, shape, smell, taste, weight, texture, and so on—as compared to relational properties, such as, for instance, having been produced in a certain way, deriving from a pig which ate certain kinds of feed and comes from a certain area, having been produced using certain techniques, and so forth. As we have suggested in previous chapters, relations ought to be included in the ontological picture if we are to understand certain structural aspects of reality: John and Paul's being brothers is a relevant fact about them, in terms of physical resemblances, character features, and many other things. And the same counts for such dyadic and triadic properties as a wine's being produced with grapes cultivated with organic agriculture, a cheese's being produced with milk coming from a certain region. All these features are, first of all, as real as the wine's taste and the cheese's smell. We do not simply live in a world full of entities, or of entities with certain monadic properties: we live in a world full of entities, their properties, their relations, their states, the processes they undergo, the properties of such processes and the relations between them, not to mention fields, ecosystems, and so forth.

5.5.5 A Place for Society

Finally, a realist approach ought to proclaim the reality of social entities, of their properties and relations, of the facts about them and the processes they undergo. As we have seen in the first section, the new realist wave has turned the tables, and current debates, rather than being about the social status of reality, are more and more about the real status of society. We feel that, in order to account for the relevance of such important phenomena as food farming certifications and denominations, social entities, such as appellations, product categories, transactions, contracts, and the like, ought to be fully acknowledged as part of the world we live in.

Being wine is a real property, but so are being a bottle, being a bottle of wine, being a bottle of Bourgogne, and being a €5,000 worth bottle of *Romanée Conti*. If we do not admit that, we may fall prey to a number of puzzlements about, for instance, counterfeited products.

What happened, for instance, when fake bottles of *Brunello di Montalcino*, *Sassicaia,* and other famous wines were exported to different countries? Was the swindle a simple matter of social stipulations—that we have decided to call 'Brunello di Montalcino' only wines produced in certain ways, instead of others? Or was there something substantial going on? The fact that what was sold was not simply wine, but a fake Brunello di Montalcino, ought to be acknowledged in order to do justice to our intuitions. And that has not only to do with the wine's taste, but

with the way it ages, and especially with its being produced according to standardised procedures.

The case of counterfeiting is especially relevant with respect to appellations, because it sheds light upon the ontology of products: a fake *Roquefort*, a fake *Parma Ham*, a fake *Brunello di Montalcino* are in fact fake, because part of being *Roquefort*, *Parma Ham*, and *Brunello di Montalcino* is respecting certain production guidelines and being certified as doing so by the relevant institutions.[11]

It is worth spending a few lines to remind ourselves of another relevant fact: appellations are not completely arbitrary institutional conventions but tend to capture real patterns in the world that have already emerged. Such patterns may have been recognised by a smaller or larger community but may later have been recognised as worthy of protection, refinement, defence against counterfeiting, loss of value, lack of appropriate communication, and so forth.[12] Such patterns are real not only as material objects, processes, and properties (vineyards, climate, composition of the ground, wine-making tools, farmers) but also as conventions, traditions, and habits (wine-making traditions and techniques, regulations, relation to other social practices, and traditions at large). Those patterns are real, just like demographic patterns, economic patterns, linguistic patterns. For instance, the qualities of wines from the *Bourgogne* area have been recognised and praised for centuries, and so have those of *Parmigiano Reggiano* cheese. Such qualities depend, at least in part, upon robustly real factors, such as climate, chemical properties of a terrain, production and seasoning procedures, but also upon real social patterns, such as techniques, traditions, production regulations. Pinning down certain monadic and relational properties, as well as aspects related to processes and procedures, and highlighting other real aspects of the product, such as social and political features of the context in which it is produced, is a paramount example of formulating a value proposal that can be evaluated by consumers.

The existence of quality certifications, appellations, and other institutional practices is a fundamental element in the formulation of a convincing value proposal that allows consumers to discriminate between a product with certain special features and products without them. A product appellation does not create a merely conventional way of considering a product: it communicates the existence of a real pattern, associating it with a brand, that, as such, makes such pattern recognisable and potentially valuable. And certifications consolidate that image and transmit a sense of the distinction between the features of that product and those of products that may be similar but that do not capture the same relevant patterns in reality.

The independence of certification agencies with respect to producers provides a service to producers themselves, because it allows them to receive a form of acknowledgement and to enjoy a brand reputation that

can be associated with the presence of all sorts of real features, from monadic ones to dyadic or more-than-dyadic ones (most of which are valuable for symbolic reasons, such as being strongly associated with the tradition of a territory).

A realist approach allows us to understand that appellations and certifications do not simply stipulate conventions, but rather they recognise, defend, refine, and communicate real patterns, existing in the world, and contribute to the formulation of value proposals that may be evaluated by consumers. It is, therefore, particularly important not only that appellations be effective and enforced by careful controls and procedures but also that they be clear and communicated through appropriate channels.

5.6 Case Study: Van Moof and Intelligent Bicycles (Reality and Innovation)

THE CASE

The adoption of emerging technologies—such as Virtual Reality, Artificial Intelligence, Games, and the Internet of Things—by brands and consumers is determining changes in markets. The design and development of satisfactory consumer experiences are becoming more and more important, especially if we consider that, despite mainstream attention to product customisation, 89% of brands are still unable to provide bespoke digital experiences.

The availability of smart bikes, which are leading cycling into the network of connected and intelligent means of transportation, is part of this trend. In smart cities, mobility will soon be led by new technologies and experienced in terms of liveability and environmentalism; smart bikes are currently considered to be the most widespread hyperconnected urban mobile micro-platforms of the future.

Cycling smartification is attracting the attention of urban planners, user communities, bike-sharers, cycling device producers, and of all stakeholders involved in the transformation of cycling, from an offline into an online activity.

The application of connections to bicycles, for instance, the dialogue between bikes and smartphones, allows data generation and transfer to centralised servers. Mapping cyclist trajectories could, for instance, be useful to urban planners. IoT technologies alter the functions of bicycles and transform them into physical objects endowed with an enhanced social dimension.

Van Moof is a brand producing bicycles which was born in Amsterdam in 2008. The capital city of the Netherlands is characterised by one of the most sophisticated bicycle cultures in the world. Van Moof's stated goal is to help the ambitious city dweller move around town faster, more confidently and in utmost style. Its product is simple (without frills), but it

has an elegant and recognisable minimalist design, with low maintenance requirements, and its targets are hassle-free urban commuters who wish to distinguish themselves but do not want to have problems with their bikes.

Van Moof's response to the demand of distinction and status has been to adopt a unique and appealing design. As to the demand of avoiding hassle, Van Moof needs to address the risk of theft, which is the main problem for bicycle commuters, who are accustomed to leaving their bicycles unattended for several hours and thus feel the need to protect themselves against the risk of theft.

The solution to that problem consists in the creation of a smart bike which cannot be stolen and which can therefore fill a gap in market offerings for private customers.

A gap in market offerings is a set of product features which are not supplied by firms in a certain sector. Market offering gaps do not always represent business opportunities (a sufficient potential demand and total production costs lower than incomes are required, too). However, being the first firm to fill a market gap with an innovation provides a firm with a durable advantage with respect to competitors, in terms of audience reputation, as well as in terms of product expertise.

In the case in point, this kind of innovation is obtained by applying Bluetooth technology, which allows the bicycle to recognise its owner and to resist tampering with by strangers; and by applying GPS connectivity, which allows it to be tracked via geo-localisation if it is removed from the place where it is parked. In addition, Van Moof guarantees the ability to track down the bicycle within fourteen days through a network of bicycle detectives; if it cannot do so, the owner is presented with a second bicycle.

Product innovation fuels, therefore, the means-end chain, which connects concrete and abstract product features to functional and psycho-social benefits and connects such benefits with consumers' external instrumental values and internal terminal values (Gutman 1982).

The addition of technological devices (concrete features) to the bicycle frame and the presence of a guarantee (abstract feature) allow the bicycle to be found under almost all circumstances (functional benefit); and that produces more safety (psycho-social benefit) in one's mobility, which, in turn, induces more serenity (internal terminal user value).

According to Van Moof, the distinctive design of the bicycle (abstract feature) allows the rider to project a modern and innovative image (psycho-social feature), which affirms his or her leadership (external instrumental value), and hence, at bottom, their self-esteem (terminal internal value).

The potential of bicycles' transformation into a data-generating device, interconnected with digital platforms, is so high that Van Moof hopes to become more than a bicycle producer but also a provider of insurance, service schedules, and full-care packages.

Data provision about distances covered and energy spent, data exchange between bicycles and traffic lights, traffic mapping, sending alert messages, and remote bicycle blocking are some of the further innovations which are already possible.

Is the creation of the Van Moof bicycle the result of a postmodernist innovation process?

DISCUSSION

5.6.1 Thinner and Thinner?

In addressing the phenomenon of smart bikes, one of the strongest, and most traditionally postmodernist, temptations would be to think that new technologies are leading to a progressive dematerialisation (or even de-realisation) of bicycles: a "thingly", three-dimensional, physical object, historically defined by a set of mechanical properties, associated with certain typical functions, would now progressively become thinner, dematerialised. The suggested shift may be, as we have learnt, from things themselves to software; from bicycles to codes.

If we look at Van Moof's proposal from a different perspective, however, we find that an approach that underestimates the relevance of reference to things themselves and their interaction with each other would be limited and possibly misleading. In particular, we find that the case of Van Moof and of similar marketing phenomena can only be understood in the light of three notions that are far better understood and developed in a realist framework than in an antirealist one, that is, recognition, tracking, environment.

5.6.2 It's Me

One of the distinctive features of Van Moof's bicycles is their anti-theft system, integrated with a much broader set of functions, wired into the bicycle frame. Purchasing a Van Moof bicycle may be more expensive than buying a traditional one, but the investment is justified by the presence of a number of features, such as, *in primis*, the bicycle's ability to identify its user(s) and to react accordingly. Legitimate-user identification gives long-known advantages, such as safety (all the way back to door keys and dogs barking at intruders) but also the possibility to personalise and customise settings—a possibility we know very well from car seats and computer user-settings.

Endowing bicycles with the ability to identify users means opening them up for a number of personalised and customised settings, but in particular it permits the creation of a one-to-one relation between them and their owners/users. If we look at recognition and identification from a somewhat abstract point of view, and prescind from the particular way

in which it is implemented in biological and/or non-biological systems, we can view it as a form of sensitivity to a real feature of the world. Being able to identify something is (at least) having the ability to distinguish between that particular entity and anything else, or to react differently to that entity than to anything else. In that sense, endowing a device with an identification system ought not to be considered as a way of sublimating it and eradicating it from the concrete texture of the world, but rather as a way of further rooting it in that concrete texture that is made up also of individuals interacting with it in possibly different ways.

Further, recognition devices are not in fact sensitive to features of things themselves but rather to codes, strings, or other symbolic patterns: our smartphones unlock with pin codes, for instance. Hence, recognition may be viewed not as a sensitivity to reality but rather as a sensitivity to a virtual and purely conventional domain. However, as we have seen from the emergence and success of biometric recognition devices, the function of such tools as smart lock systems is not to make products responsive to codes (which in fact can be cracked, revealed, or simply forgotten!) but rather to make them responsive to individuals, considered as concrete, real-world, self-identical entities.

The advantage of a sophisticated recognition system is that it can recognise someone even if that someone has forgotten their code or password, and that it reacts in a completely different way to any other individual, whether or not in possession of certain *prima facie* valid credentials. That is one of the few clear advantages of fingerprint and biometric recognition technologies that are, in fact, developing very quickly.

What we are witnessing with identification devices is the progressive growth of a new identity-sensitive real-world environment in which entities are able to interact with each other in unprecedented and different ways by discriminating between features of the world that in the past only very sophisticated beings (typically, humans and a few others) were able to discriminate. In a nutshell: recognition systems have made realities more sensitive to each other.

When a Van Moof bicycle unlocks, in response to the right user, it is reacting to the presence of its real owner, and that, quite literally, means that it is discriminating between its real owner and anyone else. The addition of that function even suggests a possibly hyperbolic reading of traditional bicycle thefts as a form of inappropriate reaction of a bicycle to someone pretending to be its owner.

If we reformulate the situation in yet another way, we can state that identification systems typically render objects sensitive to a real feature of the world that they were previously unable to discriminate: ownership (or, if you prefer, entitlement). The real world includes the social relation of property, whether private or not. Property being a social relation makes it hard for inanimate devices to recognise or discriminate it (it does not look, taste, sound, or smell like anything). Identification devices typically

endow inanimate objects with discriminating powers that enable them to respond consistently to such a relation.

Identification devices, therefore, embody one of the technological counterparts of property and entitlement to use an object, that are real aspects of the world, which until recent times remained very difficult to discriminate. That is clear if we consider that the function they perform may have been traditionally embodied by the most sophisticated beings we know, that is, humans (typically by guardians, porters, flight attendants, or other individuals who can recognise people by direct acquaintance or by techniques related to their knowledge of certain exclusive documents).

Identification technology embodies identification and discrimination of ownership and entitlement in objects themselves. The case of the unattended parked bicycle, which may be stolen by someone, could be read as a situation in which no guardian or surveillance officer is present to discriminate between an entitled user and anyone else and in which it is necessary that a bicycle embodies this capacity and carries it with itself.

5.6.3 Right Here

A further distinguishing feature of Van Moof bicycles is their tracking system. If stolen, they can be tracked by GPS devices. Endowing everyday objects (smartphones and other things) with GPS tracking technology is contributing to the constitution not simply of a virtual counterpart of the material world, in which every portion of the world has a *Doppelgänger* but rather of a more integrated environment, in which real things interact with each other more intensively than ever.

GPS technologies are contributing to the generation of an integrated and partly digitalised environment, in which objects are becoming more and more sensitive to their relative positions and to their physical location in the world. Proximity, distance, direction, approaching, distancing, relative velocity are all real-world features which are now being discriminated by many different devices, such as, most notably, vehicles. Such technologies are used to improve security and prevent theft but also to avoid accidents and collisions, to convey real-time information, to calculate risk exposure, and to help estimate insurance rates. The reason why positioning technologies are so relevant and effective is—in our opinion—the sheer fact that spatial relations are amongst the most pregnant and hence informative features of the real world. Where something is, where it is headed, what distance it is from something else, where it has been, where it usually is, are amongst the most precious pieces of information about it, whether it be a key, a bicycle, or a person.

The digital revolution is not a transition from a concrete domain to a virtual one in which positions (distances, for instance) do not play any role; hyperconnectivity also can be understood as a transition to a system in which material and physical features (*in primis* location) are integrated

in a web of dialoguing devices in which objects interact with each other in new ways.

We may become even more acutely aware of this if we bear in mind the delicate moral and political issues raised by the widespread use of positioning systems, especially in combination with recognition systems, in relation to possible violation of privacy or provision of sensitive personal information.[13] The emergence of hyperconnected reality has not obliterated distance or position, but rather made it possible for things located at great distance to interact with each other, thereby encompassing a much broader number of possible interactions than it was previously possible, only by virtue of proximity interaction.

5.6.4 Bicycles in the Urban Environment

Yet another aspect of Van Moof's innovation is its relevance for the transformation of bicycles as players in an urban environment, which is more and more shaped by technology-driven interaction.

One of the fundamental issues related to the proposal of a realist turn in contemporary philosophy was the insistence upon environmental questions and questions related to the interplay between humans and the environment more generally. If the reduction of environmental features to social discourses and conventions has characterised the postmodernist agenda, realism proposes to take a new look at environments and to consider, conversely, human reality, including its symbolic and technological aspects, as parts of real and complex environmental systems.

The smart bicycle can, for instance, be understood not only as a status symbol or as a sublimated sort of bicycle but also as an integrated device and tool, which counts as an advanced adapted response to a rapidly evolving urban environment. The Van Moof bicycle, in fact, addresses the following issues pertaining to typical patterns of the Dutch *Randstad* conglomeration:

- widespread commuting;
- traditional use of bicycles as urban vehicles;
- neutrality of bicycles (as opposed to, say, cars), with respect to social status;[14]
- excellent quality of urban paving;
- widespread cycling pathways;
- widespread use of digital technologies;
- flatness of the territory.

As Bryant (2014) has noted, modern and contemporary philosophy, even in its self-declared "materialist" versions, typically overlooks the relevance of material and environmental features for human culture. For instance, we add, it would tend to neglect the relevance of an obviously important feature of the Randstad area of the Netherlands—its

flatness—for the spreading of bicycles. A comparable bicycle culture would be difficult to imagine in mountain areas. And a comparable use of bicycles by commuters would be hard to imagine in a country with insufficient financial resources, or insufficient urban planning vision, to realise an impressive network of cycling pathways.

The innovation introduced by Van Moof represents in fact a sort of response or adjustment of the traditional Dutch vehicle to the transformation of the urban environment, considered as an interplay of anthropic and non-anthropic factors.[15] It takes the Dutch passion for technological innovation, bicycles, and urban life to conjure up something like the Van Moof bicycle.

Adopting a realist approach to this kind of innovation means bearing in mind that all technological innovations respond—or adjust to—a pre-existing and co-evolving environment that includes material, anthropological, social, technological, and cultural features, and that they contribute to the transformation of such environments. Smart bikes, as well as smartphones, are part of the urban environment and may, in the future, be programmed to reduce speed to avoid collision, to be used as Wi-Fi hotspots, to monitor user health. However, they will always be part of the urban environment and, as such, they will occupy portions of space just like they do now, and they will be important to find safely at the end of an evening out, just like they are now.

5.7 Case Study: Pallets, Affordances, and Invitation (Reality and Innovation)

THE CASE

Wooden pallets have revolutionised the logistics sector and have become a pillar of commodity handling worldwide. It is estimated that in 2019, there were more than 5 billion pallets in the world; it is also estimated that in 2019, 84% of pallet stock and 93% of yearly pallet sales comprised wooden pallets, but with growth forecast for ones made from recycled plastic, metal, and corrugated paper (The Freedonia Group, USA, 2015).

In order to determine when pallets first appeared, we should look to WW2, when US troops made extensive use of them to supply military material and other essentials. During the Normandy landings, the expression 'pallet' appeared in military material packing lists. While palletisation first appeared in order to serve military logistics, allowing for the handling of large quantities of material for military purposes, it continued after the war by spreading to humanitarian assistance projects, for instance, during the Marshall Plan.

The transition of pallets from the military to the civil domain made it indispensable to develop a standard based upon uniform criteria, which facilitates the transfer of packaging material from one country to another. Adopting such standards allowed for an intensification of commercial exchanges.

Currently, more than 450 million "EPAL" (European Pallet Association) euro-pallets and 20 million "EPAL" boxes are circulating in Europe, and together they constitute the base of the largest interchange system ever realised by users of the supply chain.

In recent years, the attention of furniture firms has focused upon a series of features of pallets: the limited cost of wood, as well as pallet robustness, stability, durability, the possibility of being coloured and waterproofed, the possible contribution of pallets to the cosiness of a space, their versatility and adaptability afforded by their modular use . . . All these features have invited designers to use pallets to design bespoke furniture proposals, which may be immediately associated with recycling culture.

The main idea is to recover unused pallets and to transform them into pieces of furniture, into equipment for retail shops, offices, and events, and into materials for urban regeneration projects. Firms specialising in this eco-business are spreading globally and are fuelling the supply for both private subjects (individuals or firms) and public administrations. The development of new products based upon pallets is, indeed, compatible both with recent circular economy models and with the condition of eco-sustainability on the demand side.

As a piece of furniture, a pallet may receive different functions: table, chair, sofa, bed, chest of drawers, glove compartment, TV-cabinet, but also wall or floor. That permits the re-purposing of dwelling interiors in short time and on limited budgets.

Pallets can be adapted to spaces for events, exhibitions, and internal as well as external displays. They can be made into the basic module of a pavilion, of a stand, of an apron, they can enrich walls or become creative objects. The ease of pallet transportation, set-up, and dismantling, as well as its compliance with principles of eco-design are particularly important aspects for this business.

Finally, the attention of architects involved in urban regeneration projects focuses upon buildings and spaces. Cities are full of concrete, and the functions of properties and spaces tend to change overtime. Pallets invite architects to reflect upon new end uses for abandoned properties and spaces and the regeneration of parts left empty. In particular, pallets become constructive elements with which it is possible to obtain spaces and surfaces with different functions and at a low cost, imprinted with a highly sustainable design concept.

What firms are making the pallet eco-furniture business grow?

There are at least three types of firms which are approaching this new market:

i. Firms producing pallets (for instance, Palm, Palletwest)

Such firms are attracted by the reduction of the overall business risk due to strategic diversification and by the increase in average contribution

margin per unit that they can achieve. Besides, such firms can use their usual raw material supply channels as leverage: such channels can obtain procurement savings by adding a new business. That can happen on condition that there are pre-existing open supply channels with eco-wood suppliers and not with wood suppliers simpliciter. At the other end of the business chain, such firms need knowledge about the final market, which they may not possess yet, and to endow themselves with the necessary design competences of building from scratch a showroom and retail network and of investing in e-commerce.

The development of e-commerce, however, offers a large number of industrial pallet producers the possibility of avoiding the problems pertaining to physical distribution channels, and to profit by their competences in the processing of raw materials, through online channels. That is why pallet production firms are becoming the dominant players in the recycled pallet furniture business.

ii. Firms producing furniture (for instance, Muuto)

Extending their range by adding a new line attracts these producers because it reduces the average procurement costs for raw material; it affords a reduced time to market thanks to the modularity and to the limited complexity of the transformation; it increases their market strength with respect to distribution channels; it promises a return of image by tuning their firms' institutional positioning in line with new eco-environmentalist demand trends. Entering eco-furnishing requires, however, that such firms open up new raw material supply channels.

iii. Start-up firms emerging and developing with the new eco-furniture business (for instance, Arredopallet.com)

Such firms are attracted by the potentially high contribution margins they can achieve, margins which can facilitate a relatively quick return on initial investments.

Being start-ups enables such firms to equip themselves from the beginning with an efficient structure, at low cost, which allows them to enter trendy market niches. They also benefit from the adoption of state-of-the-art digital procurement, processing, and sales technologies.

In summary, thanks to their features, wooden eco-sustainable pallets may find a new life in markets which are completely different from their original one.

As regards industrial handling, the environmentalist wave encourages the substitution of 5 billion wooden pallets with others made up of recycled plastic or recyclable metal. However, from the perspective of the recycling business, it risks a reversal if it is not able to profit by the creative

invitation coming from the standardised form—and from the intrinsic features—of such objects.

The shape of pallets informs design. The specific features of objects, originating from the need for logistic efficiency, fuel an efficient creativity because they help conform product hypotheses, they outline them, they inspire them, but they also contain them. They thereby make the product development both more convenient and quicker.

What makes the creative reuse of recycled pallets possible in furniture design?

DISCUSSION

5.7.1 Postmodernism. Or: Telling Only Half the Story

If we consider the process by which a plain logistic residue turns into a trendy piece of furniture, without changing much of its make-up or aspect, we are confronted with issues pertaining to the alternative between postmodernist and realist approaches. We intend to argue that, while Postmodernism has given, and can give, an important contribution to the understanding of this phenomenon, and to the development of similar proposals, its allegiance to antirealism ought to be parcelled out to one side as a negative accessory aspect that would severely limit our ability to make sense of what is happening.

Conversely, the realist approach we have been proposing would offer significant advantages, in terms of theoretical adequacy and intellectual fruitfulness. In fact, we are convinced that the advantages provided by a realist approach and the shortcomings of an antirealist postmodernist one are quite intuitive once we break free from the antirealist spell.

5.7.2 Three Postmodernist Insights

A postmodernist look at the phenomenon of the recycling and upcycling of pallets for furniture, equipment, and interior design may suggest the following impressions, which are in tune with the postmodernist *Leitmotif* that "facts (and entities) are what there are not, only interpretations":

i. *Ontology*: from an ontological point of view, the turning of a used, lowbrow, logistic device into a cheap or even fancy piece of furniture, without changing much of its make-up and aspect, may be taken to suggest that whatever we encounter in everyday life, and especially in markets, has its particular status and value from the interpretation it is given by consumers and firms, quite independently of its underlying traits and features and not from what it is (or rather "is") or was, prior to its receiving that quite arbitrary interpretation (a pallet,

a bed . . .). Nothing simply is what it counts as being (a pallet, a bed frame, a table), independently of such functions, roles, and interpretations: everything is what it is made to be by and in a particular discourse, context, interpretation, etc. In summary, what, in a logistic framework of interpretation, counts as a plain standard logistic device (a pallet), or as a mere residue of the logistic process (a spare pallet), can be made to be a cheap, or even a fancy, piece of furniture, simply by being considered as such. There are no essences of products, no "within", nothing they are "in themselves": that is why anything can become anything else! And nothing can make sense of that better than postmodernist antirealism.

ii. *Taste*: from the points of view of product design and consumer behaviour, the turning of a used, lowbrow, logistic device into a fancy piece of furniture may be considered to rest upon thoroughly postmodernist cultural coordinates for its conception, implementation, and success. Indeed, postmodernist culture is characterised, at every level, by a scepticism with respect to the possibility of a complete and final philosophical (or cultural) renovation and by the surrender to the idea that every conceptual framework and every system of values has contingent and arbitrary aspects that can never be sublimated by a radical and systematic reform: it has, therefore, always privileged critical (or ironic) reference to existing categories and habits, to the cultural engineering of purported radically new proposals. That is even one of the main senses of the expression 'Postmodernism': the modernist rejection of all traditions and dreams of a radical renovation is criticised as theoretically flawed, and it is substituted, not by an allegiance to the validity of some particular tradition, but by a critical dialogue with traditions and by a transvaluation of values. That is the postmodernist "irony": claiming that it is impossible to think and live without some received categories or habits, but at the same time claiming that there is no absolute justification behind the adoption of one particular set of categories and habits rather than another. Postmodernist culture has, thus, promoted for decades the cross-fertilisation, contamination, or transvaluation of received categories, habits, values, and traditions. That a lowbrow logistic residue can become the fancy furniture of some highbrow downtown gallery is a typical example of a postmodernist attitude, of culturally valuing irony, considered as accepting things but not taking them too seriously. In this context, the pallet is not simply transformed into something else and reused, but having stylish home furniture or exhibition design made up of plain recycled pallets may be appreciated as a piece of irony towards received categories and values: irony with respect to received categories (logistics, furniture) but especially irony with respect to received judgements of value (lowbrow | highbrow; rough | sophisticated; plain | stylish;

ordinary | extraordinary). In summary, not only is it possible to make furniture with recycled pallets, but doing so may work well because it also questions existing habits, standards, and values, thereby adding a piece of postmodernist irony to shops, offices, and consumer homes.

iii. *Narratives*: there is at least a third relevant aspect of the upcycling of pallets as furniture and equipment, and that concerns the ecological narrative such a proposal is part of. Furniture made up of recycled pallets is indeed made up of recycled stuff, hence, by purchasing and using it, a customer or a client becomes part of a sustainable production and value chain and contribute to alleviate the negative impact of linear economic cycles upon the environment. These aspects of the phenomenon should not be underestimated, because they jointly seem to suggest that not only may the same items (pallets) become completely different things (tables, beds, desks) simply by being interpreted (presented, used) otherwise, but that even the process of using pallets to build furniture may be completely different, and produce completely different effects, depending upon the way in which it is interpreted and formulated: for instance, the process of making furniture with pallets can be considered as the elaboration of a new kind of low-cost product, concentrating upon the budgetary constraints of lower-income social groups, and it may be appreciated by them for the availability of inexpensive but robust furniture; the very same operation may be presented as an example of recycling, as the elaboration of an eco-product, whose main virtue is sustainability (as in our case in point). Hence, picking up pallets and using them as a bed can be completely different gestures, and bestow completely different types of value, depending upon the story they are part of—a story of saving money or a story of saving resources. What approach could make sense of that relative arbitrariness, more than postmodernist antirealism?

All of these claims provide important perspectives that ought not to be ignored or underestimated; rather, realism ought to prove that it can surpass Postmodernism by illustrating a broader or deeper aspect of this same phenomenon. And that seems, *prima facie*, very difficult. Isn't Postmodernism the cultural and social *trait d'union* of such diverse phenomena as an old tram becoming a moving restaurant (Milan), a used airplane fuselage being a business meeting room (Treviso), a custom house, a shipyard, a hangar, a power station, a railway station, or even a cold-war military facility becoming trendy exhibition spaces (Venice, Milan, Paris, London, Shanghai, Goteborg, you name it)? Postmodernist radical anti-essentialism, its cultural irony, and its focus upon narrative-relativity seem to make it the ideal conceptual companion for this age of transformations,

adaptations, and creative reuse and, conversely, make realism appear as an outdated philosophical attitude, unable to grapple with our times.

In what follows, we shall argue that, in fact, the opposite is true: realism is a much better and more intuitive way of thinking about what is going on in these cases.

5.7.3 Realist(ic) Ontologies of Transformation

How is it possible for something to instantiate two completely different concepts at the same time (being a pallet and being a table, being a tram and being a restaurant, etc.), without a big change? Imagine you really are a systematically antirealist postmodernist. The antirealist thesis is clear: there are no pallets, tables, trams, or restaurants in the first place: all there is, is our considering something as something, our describing it as something, for example, our experiencing something as a tram, a restaurant, a screwdriver, an art gallery. The antirealist morale appears as an adjustment of the old Hegelian (1807, *Preface*) statement that "the only object is this very movement of the subject". If one uses a screwdriver to open up a parcel, what used to be a screwdriver is now a cutter: "what used to *be a screwdriver*" *actually meaning "what used to be considered ("used", "referred to" . . . etc.) as* a screwdriver". In our case, what used to be *considered* a pallet is now *considered* an element of a sofa, as a table, as a bed frame, etc. That might be an antirealist approach.

Our realistic reply to a postmodernist approach to creative reuse pivots upon two correlated notions: irreducibility and extrinsic traits.

Irreducibility: our readers are already familiar with the thesis of the irreducibility of reality to any correct description. As we have claimed in the first part of the book, realism may be taken to entail that no correct description of an entity excludes the existence of other correct descriptions of that very same entity: no entity can be reduced to any (or all) of its possible correct descriptions. Realism is the thesis that everything really is what it is, not the thesis that everything is just what it is correctly said to be, as antirealist critics maintain. Although there are essentialist forms of realism, it is false that realism coincides with essentialism (DeLanda 2006). In fact, as we have claimed, our position is neutral with respect to the issue of essentialism, and it upholds the intuitive thesis that every real entity exemplifies many different concepts at the same time.

Realism ought not to be confused with the thesis that, for every entity *E*, and any couple of different concepts *C1* and *C2*, it is impossible that if *E* exemplifies *C1*, it also exemplifies *C2*: that it is impossible that if something is a pallet, it also is a bed. There are countless correct ways of considering or referring to one and the same real entity that ought to be—as such—considered as all the more independent of any particular perspective or way of making reference to it.

Extrinsic traits: a trait of an entity is anything true of it—a property, a relation, a state, a fact about it, shape, size, origin, similarity to something else, weight, position, distance from a certain place, style, aesthetic aspects, etc. We claim that, in order not only to reply to postmodernist ideas but also to understand the phenomenon of creative reuse, the role of extrinsic traits is particularly relevant. Our thesis is that every real entity has countless traits that are extrinsic to its instantiating a certain concept, and that such irreducible traits play a central role in its creative reuse.

A trait *T* of an entity *E* is extrinsic to *E*'s instantiating some concept *C*, if *E's* being *T* cannot be inferred from its being *C*: for example, an extrinsic trait of this screwdriver is its having an *orange* handle. A trait *T* of an entity *E* instantiating some concept *C* is intrinsic if *E*'s being *T* can be inferred from its being *C*. An intrinsic trait of a cube is its having six faces; an intrinsic trait of a whale is its being a mammal; an intrinsic trait of a screwdriver is its being produced as such.[16]

Not only are real entities more than what is captured by their possible different classifications, they necessarily have traits that are extrinsic to those entities instantiating certain concepts. There are many traits of this pallet that are extrinsic to its being a pallet and to being considered as such: this particular pallet has a particular smell (because it is made of—say—oak wood or pine); it has a particular texture (it has a certain coarseness of pattern or smoothness); it has a particular colour (say, some shade of brown, beige, dark-yellow, depending upon its age and vicissitudes). This pallet, like many others, also has important extrinsic relational traits: regardless of its really being a pallet, it shares certain features with other types of objects, for example, it is of the same order of magnitude as certain widespread pieces of furniture, like sofas, beds, tables, bookcases, etc.;[17] it is made up of the same (or similar) materials (wood) that most pieces of furniture are made up of, thereby—and this is a further relational trait—having many of the most relevant features that such materials have (similar elasticity and robustness indexes, similar durability).

Moreover, the very frame and structure of this pallet, and of pallets in general, resembles in significant ways those of bed slats and of the internal wooden structures of sofas and other pieces of furniture, thereby instantiating further structural properties. On top of that, the load pallets are designed to bear by far exceeds the one that most pieces of furniture are expected to support (Europallets can bear a load of 4,000 kg, when stacked). We can add some other unrelated but relevant extrinsic traits of this pallet and others like it, such as having a smell (wood) which is pleasant to many people and even evokes some sense of cosiness or homeliness; being aesthetically reminiscent of minimalist or modular design; being cheap, being harmless (not toxic), being used, hence recycled. All these traits, that are conceptually extrinsic to this entity being a pallet, but are nevertheless real features of it, exist and can be perceived or otherwise noticed by anyone who is not simply willing to consider this real entity as

an instance of the pallet type, and they constitute a source of inspiration for a viable creative reuse.

Something made up of the same material as furniture, with the same size as certain pieces of furniture, with similar elasticity, robustness, durability as furniture, with aesthetic features compatible with its appearing in a home or in a shop, with a low cost, and of which there are countless instances, may be reused as furniture. Analogue facts hold good, *mutatis mutandis*, of power stations, hangars, bunkers, trams, aircraft fuselages.

The extrinsic traits of real entities with respect to the concepts they exemplify in more intuitive ways, the traits they really have but that are extrinsic to their instantiating certain types, are the substrate of most creative adaptations and reuses. Real irreducible traits form the basis of such creative reuse, because they may inspire such a reuse. They also constrain the range of possible sensible reuses, and that is an aspect that antirealist Postmodernism cannot come to terms with: a tram, a boat, a train wagon, and perhaps even a car, but not a bicycle, a scooter, or a skateboard, have the right kind of extrinsic traits to become restaurants: a tram, a boat, a train wagon have a size similar to that of a restaurant dining room or rooms, they contain seats and tables, their dimension is sufficient to accommodate a basic kitchen and some storage and conservation system for food, beverage, and flatware; they have a sheltered structure; they are or may easily be equipped with heating and refrigeration systems; they have vintage design which is not uncommon for restaurants; and can be considered cosy or even classy: all those traits are extrinsic to their being trams, boats, or train wagons but make certain trams, boats, and train wagons adaptable to creative reuse as restaurants. If postmodernist antirealism were true, that is, if what turns something into something else is simply its being interpreted otherwise, why can other means of transport, such as skateboards, bicycles, or scooters, not be creatively reused as restaurants? One intuitive answer to this only apparently naïve question is that creative reuse is not just abracadabra reuse: one cannot turn a bicycle into a restaurant, simply by reinterpreting it as such; one cannot turn a watch into a bed, simply by reinterpreting it as such; one might be able to creatively reuse orange skins to produce a hat, but it is hard to imagine how one could creatively reuse hats to produce orange squash.

If this point appears trivial to you, we are glad that it does, because postmodernist antirealism has probably not driven you so far as to completely overlook the obvious fact that creative reuse relies upon background, yet real traits of entities. Real traits both afford innovative uses and constrain them. You can make a bed with a pallet, but not with a banana, because the traits of pallets allow or even inspire you such a creative use, whereas the traits of a banana are simply incompatible with it: and that means not conceptually (linguistically, symbolically, semantically) incompatible but actually unfit for that purpose.

The distance from the original use of a pallet to its new status as a bed may suggest the idea that there is nothing to creative reuse except reinterpretation, redefinition, reformulation, etc. But if that were true, that is, if an antirealist interpretation of creative reuse were correct, then it would be possible not only to reuse old aircraft fuselages as meeting rooms, but also to use old meeting rooms as aircrafts, and old restaurants as trams. If one can reinterpret a pallet as a bed and a tram as a restaurant, why cannot one reinterpret a bed as a pallet or a restaurant as a tram, or even, perhaps more creatively, reinterpret a pallet as a tram?

The notion of extrinsic traits provides a conceptual framework to articulate both the openness and the constraints of creative reuse. It ought to be stressed that reality, in this framework, does not count as a merely negative pole, as a mere constraint on possible reuses: irreducible properties of everyday objects are often positive sources of inspiration for creative or innovative uses: the location and size of an abandoned power station, the structure and elasticity of a pallet, the dimension and shape of a used *bic* pen, all can be positive sources of inspiration for creative reuses. In fact, the negativity of reference to reality is only such within the context of an abracadabra antirealist Postmodernism, which imagines that someone in search of some recycled material to make a mattress out of would feel frustrated by realising that used needles are unsuitable. Reality is not buried behind some opaque film of experience. It goes all the way through, from the surface to the remotest depths. The process of creative reuse and innovation is often inspired not by the ordinary classifications of everyday products but by the real and irreducible traits they do have and sometimes clearly display. Conceptually, being a pallet is different from being a bed or a table, but pallets (as anything) have lots of traits that are similar to or compatible with properties that beds are expected to have, such as having a certain size, robustness, durability, elasticity, relative smoothness, as well as the absence of other properties which would make them unsuitable, such as having a strong smell, producing strong noises, flashing with light upon contact, being full of bumps, etc. Realism is a much more intuitive and suitable conceptual framework than antirealism for a thorough understanding of the ontological preconditions for, of the sources of inspiration for, and of the constraints of creative reuse.

5.7.4 Unamendability and the Relevance of Perception

There is another aspect of the issue of creative reuse that cannot be fully appreciated from a radically postmodernist perspective: the relevance of perception, as a public, direct, and abundant availability of manifest irreducible traits. One of the reasons why postmodernist thought cannot be a completely satisfactory intellectual tool for the understanding of creative reuse is its underestimation (or even denial) of the importance of perception and of its providing an independent intersubjective access to a whole

dimension of extrinsic traits, with respect to everyday classifications, traits that can inspire creative thinkers to innovate.

After half a century antirealist insistence upon the purported primacy of theory with respect to experience, and of habits, interpretations and language with respect to perception, some realist philosophers have reaffirmed the importance of a number of aspects of perception that are central to our understanding of creative reuse. We could summarise these aspects as follows:

- perception is generous—it provides (or even exposes one to) rich information;
- it is autonomous—it operates with its own principles and does not start with thought;
- it is impermeable—it is not altered by theories, concepts, or languages;
- it is stubborn—it cannot be moulded at will;
- it is holophantic—it does not omit information that is not relevant to the perceiver's interest;
- it is superabundant—its flow of information cannot be interrupted;
- it is common—the information provided is accessible to all suitably placed subjects;
- it is attuned—it presents entities of sizes and at distances that are practically relevant.

Perception is a privileged gateway to extrinsic traits. Something exemplifying the concept of pallet, and its being correctly believed to be a pallet, does not block out, cloud, or even saturate the way it looks, smells, feels, the appearance of its shape and structure, of its size and degree of opacity, the shade of its colour, the sounds it produces when scratched or stepped upon, etc., all of which remain manifest to any suitably placed perceiver.

With respect to perception, this pallet is not an item of the pallet type but rather an entity with such and such traits that reveal themselves by observing it, smelling it, touching it, walking around it, trying to lift it, putting it under different types of light, etc. Not only is this pallet an entity with countless traits that are extrinsic to the ways it is or may be classified or categorised; it is also an entity that can be perceived as having a number of sensuous properties, which are also independent of the way it is classified, and which may be directly and immediately appreciated by perceivers. Sensuous properties of entities are—so to speak—in the public domain: everyone can see the size of a pallet, anyone can feel the coarseness of a pallet, hear the sound it produces if scrubbed or sat upon, or feel its elasticity, lying on a mattress laid upon it.

For instance, the smell of a pallet can be smelt by anyone and can be correctly recognised as a typical oak wood smell (in case this pallet

is made of oak); the shape and colour of this pallet can (and must) be perceived by anyone whose perceptual system is operating properly, independently of whether the perceiver has or does not have a concept of pallet—for instance, a child or someone completely unaware of logistics and packaging would not perceive a different colour than a warehouse worker when they observe this pallet, although an expert warehouse worker may be able to tell a number of facts about the pallet at first sight, whereas a layperson would not.[18]

The robust texture of perception allows us to perceive traits and features of real entities, independently of their being correctly identified as tokens of certain types: it enables us to appreciate the colour and transparency of a stone or the gleam of a metal, independently of recognising them as instances of that certain type of stone or metal. Jewellery, but also dyeing, simply would not exist without this almost trivial fact.

Creative and adaptive reuse, recycling, upcycling, patchwork, *bricolage* are often inspired by the independence of sensuous properties with respect to classifications. The philosophical notion of affordances (Gibson 1979; Ferraris 2014b; Heras-Escribano 2019) evokes the mutual exposure of organisms and other entities in an environment, with particular reference to the role of perception: what we see, touch, hear, come in direct contact with is more directly available, or at our disposal, for use or innovative/adaptive reuse. If we think of creative reuse or innovative use, that is, of entities being used in ways which have nothing or little to do with what they previously were, perception becomes a particularly relevant reference point: by walking on a fallen tree to cross a creek, I am focusing upon the position, size, shape, texture, and robustness of the tree, disregarding its very being an oak tree, or even a tree: I see the tree, feel it with my hands, test it with one foot, hear the sound it produces while I am cautiously treading it, but I disregard the fact that it is a tree (and it is a tree, for sure, but my perception and my current practical interests are not about that). By using a screwdriver to open a package, I am focusing upon its shape, dimension, robustness, size, weight, handiness, while disregarding its truly being a screwdriver and truly being orange.

Now we can see that the situation with respect to realism and creative reuse is somewhat reversed: an antirealist look at the phenomenon seemed to suggest that realism would be ontologically and practically conservative, holding on to received categories and incapable of innovating. We are, instead, discovering that realism discloses the concrete ontological foundations of creative reuse, indicating the independence of objects and their traits with respect to their classifications; it indicates the ontological background of opportunities and their concrete constraints by pointing out the significance of extrinsic traits. It also points out subjective sources of innovation and creative reuse, by highlighting the centrality of perception, as a source of abundant information that is independent of classifications and even of ontological status. At this point,

on the other hand, postmodernist antirealism can only demonstrate its difficulty in explaining why, ontologically speaking, not everything can be used to produce everything else, and, subjectively speaking, what the sources of creative reuse and innovation may be.

If we come back to our bed made up of recycled pallets, we realise how hard it would be to understand such an innovative use without reference to real extrinsic traits and to perception. And the same counts *a fortiori* for many other types of creative use or reuse: like using t-shirts to mark goalposts in an impromptu football game at the park or as a flag in a *capture the flag* game; like using old pans as musical instruments at a children's parade, or using recycled bins and other urban material as musical instruments in a theatrical performance, such as the famous Stomp project started doing in the 1990s, or, indeed, like using an old tram as a moving restaurant, or a used aircraft fuselage as a meeting room. In all these cases, perception affords a number of genuinely relevant and independent traits that may inspire a user or a group of users to make creative use or reuse of that same entity.[19]

Perceiving extrinsic traits of pallets, such as colour, texture, size, weight, smell, aspect, and so forth, can be an extremely effective source of inspiration. And perception is not only a means of inspecting entities but a continuous source of non-regimented information about available entities and their traits in one's environment. Perception is also somewhat attuned to practical relevance: it presents subjects with entities that are of a dimension and at a distance that make them better candidates for use and reuse than entities that are too distant, too small, too thin, or that alter other entities too little to be of any practical consequence.[20] Perception typically provides information whose grain is of the right order of magnitude to be of practical consequence.

What humans come into contact with can inspire them more directly, in part due to the superabundance of information provided by perception with respect to other forms of knowledge, such as knowledge by description: in fact, the unamendability of perception regards not only the perceiver's inability to perceive things otherwise simply by changing their beliefs about them; unamendability also involves resistance to informational frugality—perception does not omit sensuous traits of entities that a perceiver might consider irrelevant or even disturbing with respect to their current interests. This aspect may be regarded as a disadvantage of perception as compared to descriptive knowledge, which is more frugal and focused; but the relative independence of perception also provides a fresh and abundant source of information that is not prejudiced by the received theoretical and practical habits of a community.

Furthermore, perception is synchronic: it necessarily presents many different traits of entities (colour, size, smell, texture, location, distance, shape, relative position, movement patterns) simultaneously and synthetically, whereas descriptive knowledge is diachronic, taking place in

a discursive fashion, thereby lacking that particular kind of analogical synthesis. One cannot stop smelling an unpleasant odour in an otherwise lovely hotel room by deciding to ignore it; one cannot stop seeing an industrial power plant lying in the midst of an otherwise lovely valley simply by ignoring it; one cannot stop hearing a disturbing ambulance siren coming through a window in the midst of an otherwise lovely musical performance simply by ignoring it: the only solution is to close one's eyes, one's nose, one's ears, to turn, to go away, etc. Along similar lines, perception is indifferent to the irrelevance of certain sensuous properties of entities to their classification and thus stubbornly presents them.

Perception is dense, holographic, synchronic, overabundant, non-regimented, as opposed to linguistic descriptions, which not only may, but necessarily must omit countless traits of real entities, which are relative to conceptual frameworks, and which are diachronic. That is perhaps why it is much easier to imagine innovative uses of entities when one perceives them directly, rather than by merely reading or hearing about them, and why, so often, the invention of a creative reuse is mediated by the production of sketches, drafts, scale-models, or prototypes. Perception is usually an important sparring partner of imagination, which retains some of its features (perception-like imagery, for instance).

5.7.5 Affordances and Invitation

The concept of affordances was coined in cognitive psychology to discuss the relevance of perceived or perceivable environmental possibilities for action, whereas the concept of invitation underlines the directions for use provided by what we have been referring to as extrinsic traits. The two concepts do not coincide but partly overlap, since affordances are supposed to be related to environmental exposure (proximity, perception, interaction), whereas invitations seem to be less dependent upon direct exposure or direct perceivability.

Both individual entities (this pallet) and sets of individuals (the set of pallets in my proximity or in a certain area) seem to offer different possibilities for use and reuse but also to constrain such possibilities: one would not venture to build an airplane with recycled undetonated explosives.

One ought not to conflate the two different notions of affordances and invitation: both highlight the idea that what is present in a certain environment provides some guidance for action because of its manifest traits. But the notion of affordance insists upon the correct idea that what is present in an environment is or may be directly perceivable, and that perception is a dense and generous source of information for action. The notion of invitation, in our opinion, highlights the relevance of extrinsic traits that can form the basis for action. However, it does not exclusively point to the role of perception: invitation covers the interplay between reality (real traits) and thought (imagination, but also calculation, design,

etc.) and refers to a broader spectrum of phenomena. Such phenomena go from using a tree fallen over a creek as a casual bridge (affordances) to planning to build a village using the wood from a forest nearby, after calculating the necessary amount of wood, counting the trees, reflecting upon property rights, transportation costs, environmental impact, etc. (invitation).

In our case, pallets have been providing affordances to casual users: they are abundant in densely populated areas, such as urban areas, they are perceivable and often they are even abandoned after use, so they do offer affordances in a very intuitive sense: someone living in a town and in need of a bed may see a couple of abandoned pallets and carry them home to use them as an improvised bed or as a table top. They may have done that because they have immediately recognised that their visible traits made them available for those uses, or more probably because they had seen (or heard about) such a use before, at someone else's place: in which case, it is more sensible to assume that they did not simply come across abandoned pallets and received the inspiration to use them as beds or furniture but, rather, that they have searched for—and not simply encountered—abandoned pallets in order to replicate what they had seen (or heard about). They may have asked a supermarket or a DIY-store for spare pallets, etc., just like some people do when they need used cardboard boxes to pack their belongings when moving to a new place.

Then came the businesses that were inspired by such a casual but relatively widespread trend and imagined further adaptations, variations, creative reuses. Of course, even before the calculations came along, there must have been some sketching, modelling, prototyping, all of which was far from direct perception or untrained imagination. But the principle was the same: detecting real traits of objects, mainly by directly perceiving them, and imagining a creative reuse suggested by the awareness of such traits and constrained by it.

Our insistence upon the distinction between affordances and invitation—which by no means entails an underestimation of any one of them—also reminds us that there is a theoretical as well as a practical distinction between the real phenomenon of being inspired to use something in some way by a direct perceptual exposure to it (and in terms of immediate use) and being inspired to use something in some way by traits that it has, but also through a number of possibly sophisticated steps, involving imagination, calculations, modelling, prototyping, testing, etc.[21]

For instance, seeing a fallen tree lying parallel to a creek while attempting to cross that creek and throwing the fallen tree across it in order to get to the other side without getting one's feet wet is probably a good example of affordances. Seeing the fallen tree inspires the perceiver to use it as an improvised bridge.[22] At the same time, though, seeing that the fallen tree across the creek has a dangerous crack and also seeing that the river banks

are full of large stone blocks may lead a person or a community to think that such stone blocks may be piled up and fitted together in some appropriate way in order to substitute the tree with something more robust and durable, that is, a proper bridge or at least some kind of proto-bridge. And that is a good example of invitation.

In our case, the distinction between affordances and invitation can help us imagine that, perhaps, at the beginning, some student or other person may have been inspired to use recycled pallets as beds by their perceptual exposure to actual pallets; and the aforementioned aspects of perception would of course play a leading role in that process; but if we consider companies that design, produce, distribute, and advertise furniture made up of recycled pallets, affordances are not enough, and we have to resort to more structural aspects, which do not simply involve inspiration through perceptual exposure, but rather imagination, creativity, design, evaluations, comparisons of competing alternatives, market research, and so on. All that is not immediate, of course, and, more significantly, it is not confined to the encounter between one perceiver and a couple of pallets: it involves—or may involve—team work, long intermediate phases, sketches, prototyping, etc. But the point is that the process which goes from pallets to recycled pallet furniture does depend upon the same principles: the irreducibility of real traits of entities to their exemplifying certain concepts, their compatibility with certain different uses and not with others, their direct and public accessibility through perception as an independent source of information, and so forth.

Perception plays an important, perhaps even crucial, role with respect to creative reuses of concrete entities or material ones, but creative reuse can reach far beyond the domain of concrete, material objects and extend to social entities, such as laws, media, devices: for instance, Clovis' *lex salica* (circa 500 CE) was originally intended as a legal codification applying to Western Franks only, but it was subsequently (re)used in parts of Europe far from those territories, to settle disputes about royal succession rights (in Italic states, France, Spain, Germanic states, and so forth). A creative reuse of a law or of a contract does not necessarily include a crucial role for perception, because the traits of the law or of the contract, which may become relevant for the reuse, may not be material or concrete. Mobile phones were invented and marketed as communication devices, but they are more and more used by urban planners and law enforcement authorities to track people. Also, in this case, perception plays a minor role, because the relevant traits of mobile devices are not sensuous but rather functional: nevertheless, they are grounded in the real and irreducible traits of the relevant devices, which constrain the kinds of possible creative reuses. It would be difficult to reuse a love letter (or a used tram) as a law code, just as it would be difficult to reuse footprints or fingerprints as communication devices.

5.7.6 Realising Reality

All of the real and irreducible traits we have just been discussing, both on the broader ontological and on the strictly perceptual side, not only exist out there, for us, while and because we are philosophising about them: all such traits of objects are manifest to everyone who is open to consider them or to perform some elementary cognitive operations (such as generalising or comparing).

For instance, it is not some esoteric truth about this pallet that it is made up of roughly the same material as an ordinary piece of furniture, such as a bed or a table: it is an obvious and manifest fact about it, which can be grasped by anyone willing to pay some attention to it. That this pallet has a similar structure, elasticity, robustness, as a bed-frame is, again, no arcane metaphysical truth: it is obvious if one's attention is drawn to it. That this pallet is light-brown, that it smells like wood, that it is not translucent, etc., are traits it bears on its face. This series of apparently redundant truths is in fact crucial, if we wish to understand why innovation is not a branch of metaphysics but rather involves ordinary but precious human aptitudes, such as creativity, intuition, talent, imagination.[23]

One can open a bottle of beer with a lighter, if one realises that a lighter (or lighters, more generally) has (have) a shape, a size, and a rigidity that are compatible with the lever principle and with the shape and size of a bottle cap. One can crack a nut open with a stone or a shoe, if one realises that the stone or the shoe have the right rigidity to crack a nut open but also the right shape, weight, and size to be lifted and swung by a person. One can sew a dress using old curtains as material after noticing that the shape, size, colour, and texture of those curtains are compatible with, or even ideal for, that use. Again, one can adapt an abandoned power station and reuse it as an exhibition space after realising that its size, location, the volume of its halls and rooms, and even its look are suitable for that new function.

One may venture to claim that similar patterns of systematic creative reuse are at the base of most agricultural and breeding processes, which are based upon the general principle of using vegetal and animal life as sources of nourishment or labour,[24] that is, as something extrinsic to their exemplifying certain concepts (sheep, cow, cabbage, and so forth): surely, there is nothing intrinsic about chickens or cows that is as such related to providing sources of nourishment for humans (eggs, milk) or to being direct sources of nourishment (meat).[25]

5.7.7 A Realist Cultural Framework for Creative Reuse

If we come back to the second claim about the solidarity of creative reuse with postmodernist culture, that is, the thesis that postmodernist irony and transvaluation of values is a cultural precondition of the type of

creative reuse we are considering (pallets as beds), the issue becomes even more interesting. It is certainly true that postmodernist irony makes the combination of distant or even opposite fields particularly attractive:[26] for instance, the combination of power station (work, production) and exhibition space (leisure, culture) or the combination of tram (impersonal means of transport) and restaurant (intimate place for a date). The postmodernist irony resides in both the rejection of received hierarchies of values (culture above production, for instance) and the blurring of received systems of classification (tram, restaurant, etc.): for instance, the thrill of having a home in which bold designers have turned plain pallets into stylish furniture, or of showing oneself to disregard received value distinctions and hierarchies. However, we doubt that the postmodernist tale can be so effective as to rationalise what is going on with furniture and equipment made with recycled pallets.

First of all, the emphasis of most producers is not on contamination, the blurring of boundaries, or the transvaluation of values at all: rather it is about sustainability, environmental responsibility, and awareness of ecological consequences of consumer choices.[27] If we look at the keywords used by producers and consumers, we rather find a massive reference to environmental awareness, sustainability, and ecology.

The antirealist postmodernist moral of the pallet story, that things are not simply what they are and that consumers appreciate being reminded of that, can be turned upside down and reformulated in realist terms: indeed, things are not simply instances of concepts that correctly classify them, they have countless extrinsic traits—a pallet is not simply a pallet, a bed is not simply a bed, not because it is symbolically irreducible to one classification, but because a pallet is also an arrangement of wooden slats, which have been obtained by chopping down trees, by processing the wood through machinery, thereby producing carbon dioxide and increasing the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere; the slats have been assembled and fastened using further material and work, then the pallet has been shipped and transported via some means of transport based upon fossil fuel, further incrementing the greenhouse effect. When a pallet is disposed of, it is transported, once again, to some dump or other facility, increasing once more the amount of greenhouse gas in the atmosphere and occupying parts of a territory—and a new production cycle starts for some other pallet that will undergo similar stages and steps. So, yes, certainly, neither a pallet nor a bed is just a pallet or a bed: they summarise in themselves a whole chain of resource extraction, industrial processing, logistic network, and concentrate in themselves the environmental impact of that chain (a certain carbon footprint, for instance).

The stronger story behind the value proposal associated with pallet furniture is not an ironic antirealist one; it is rather the opposite—that things do exist before, after, and beyond their being used in certain ways. That everything around us, everything we purchase, and get rid of, does

not come out of nowhere when it is produced and does not cease to exist when it is disposed of. Things are real, they come out of somewhere, they end up somewhere, and that basic or trivial fact lies at the foundation of corporate responsibility and consumer responsibility.

The bed I rest upon is made up of material that pre-exists it, and it will continue to exist after I have got rid of it. In fact, environmentalism is mostly about these simple facts which are difficult to accommodate in a consistent antirealist framework:

i. not all reality is human reality: most ecological facts are ontologically independent of human interpretations;
ii. human life is not ontologically self-contained: it takes place in an ecological environment which affects it and which is affected by it.[28]

Despite some postmodernist attempts to deny climate change and ignore environmentalist concerns by resorting to the grotesque idea that climate change is itself socially constructed—that is, that it is "real" relative to only certain scientific parameters, discourses, and conventions—environmental concerns are in part at the heart of the recent resurgence of realist philosophical proposals, precisely because of a dissatisfaction with conceptual frameworks that do not account for the entangled-ness of human and non-human reality. Hence, the value proposal associated with the development of furniture made with creatively reused pallets does not pivot on postmodernist antirealist irony but rather—and this may be a sad fact about it—on a very serious and realist environmental concern: that the things we use are produced consuming scarce and rapidly diminishing natural resources, obtained by excavating, deforesting, and poisoning territories; processing those resources and shipping final products using systems that corrupt the environment in many ways; and that, when we dispose of them without carefully considering how to reuse them, we continue to pollute our world and ensure the further exploitation of its resources and pollution of its environment. Environmentalism is the very awareness that beds and pallets are not created by cultural stipulation, transported by convention, and disposed of by oblivion.

5.7.8 Telling the Real Story

If we come to the third aspect of Postmodernism which seemed to play an important role—that is, the emphasis on narratives and storytelling—we are to meet the challenge of an even more general claim: realism has shown that reality is presupposed by creative reuse and that some form of realism plays an important role in the value proposal associated with recycling pallets, but—and this is the present issue—the whole process of formulating and appreciating value proposals pivoting on sustainability rests upon a condition that only Postmodernism appears to be able to

make sense of, that is, storytelling. Turning pallets into house furniture and office equipment counts as a sustainable gesture only within an ecologist narrative. It is the narrative, the particular kind of storytelling, that makes that gesture what it is, that bestows that particular value upon the market proposal. For instance, the price variable may be completely different, depending on whether the same operation of making furniture and equipment from spare pallets takes place as a low-cost value proposal or as an environmentalist value proposal. We would like to meet this challenge partly by brushing up our general argument against antirealist strategies, partly by pointing out aspects that postmodernists tend to underestimate or overlook.

Of course, storytelling, narratives, symbolic and intangible aspects, and many, many other factors play an important role in this case. However, they ought not to block out other relevant factors which cannot be accommodated in a purely antirealist postmodernist framework. To begin with, it is true that one and the same process—the conversion of pallets into furniture and equipment—may count as a different gesture depending upon the narrative it is part of. But that, once more, is inconsistent with realism only if we mistakenly equate realism with the thesis that one and the same entity cannot exemplify two different concepts at the same time, for example, that Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon cannot be, at the same time, a violation of an order of the Roman Senate and a message to his supporters. But the form of realism we uphold is not only compatible with this position, but it is a vindication thereof: every real entity, including social entities, is irreducible to any of its correct classifications and may be correctly classified in different ways. There are many different correct ways of classifying a real entity and of telling a true story.

However—and this is a problem that realism does not have but antirealism does—one and the same entity cannot exemplify just any concept. Some classifications are incorrect, some stories are false or inaccurate: just as you may turn a tram into a restaurant but it is difficult to turn a skateboard into one, you can correctly classify one and the same entity (including a process) in many different ways, but that does not mean that you can classify it in any way you like: if the pallets used to make house furniture and office equipment are not in fact recycled or spare pallets, but are rather produced from scratch for that purpose, consuming more natural resources and polluting the environment, then the whole ecology story is not a correct description of that process. Different descriptions may be correct or incorrect depending on the way things really are. If pallet furniture is expensive, then we only apparently have a low-cost proposal; if this pallet is not recycled, then we only apparently have a sustainable proposal; if the local population is exploited, to produce this banana, then the process of producing it is only apparently a socially responsible proposal; if the table was not designed by a famous designer, then we only apparently have a fancy proposal.

If there are elements in the description of the process, or of the product, that are inaccurate or false, or even intentionally mendacious, then the value proposal associated with that product is incorrect, hence the proposal is weak, deceitful, or even fraudulent. For instance, one and the same coffee production process may be correctly described as participatory, inclusive, having a high degree of CSR with respect to local populations; or it may be correctly described as being ecologically sustainable or complying with norms regulating the production of organic food. So, one and the same process may be correctly defined in at least three different ways, and lead to different value proposals, depending upon the way it is described. But that does not mean that anything goes, that any story and any value proposal can be a truthful story and a sound value proposal: for instance, if norms regulating organic food production are not in fact respected, then the process cannot be correctly described as organic food production. If the company management is unaware of that, then, the story is still not truthful, and the proposal is still not sound. If the company management is aware of that, then the proposal is not only untruthful but also mendacious, and the value proposal is fraudulent. Consumers and various independent agencies tend to be quite interested in the truthfulness of narratives and in the validity of value proposals and to reward or punish businesses in various ways depending upon their compliance with standards of truthfulness, accuracy, and honesty. And, of course, businesses tend to be very concerned about their reputation for credibility and trustworthiness, and to address possible breaches with utmost seriousness.

We cannot make any sense of the idea of a certain narrative if we completely ignore what any narrative implies—that is, at least its truthfulness—in order to stick to the postmodernist idea that any narrative goes. Narratives are only possible on the basis of a general credibility of market agents, and such credibility is an intrinsic part of the value proposals: that is one of the reasons why companies often display or advertise the concrete elements that make their narratives credible, why they show places, faces, agents, conditions, tests, statistics, corroborating their claims.

Being recycled is a real trait of pallet furniture: being a recycled pallet may play a completely different role, depending upon the cultural background in which the reuse takes place. If we look at the whole phenomenon of pallet-made furniture and equipment, we notice not only that pallets are *de facto* reused to build furniture and equipment; most of the furniture, interior design, or exhibition design, we have considered, is, so to speak, proudly made up of recycled pallets. There is an intuitive osmosis from reality to narrative. In order to understand this subtle but very relevant fact, we ought to think that furniture could be made up of recycled pallets without that fact being revealed or advertised: some of the things we use every day are in fact made up of recycled material,

without that feature being mentioned or advertised by the firms that produce them. Hence, one could conceal the traits of recycled pallets that make them recognisable as such, and still use them to build furniture, interiors, exhibition spaces, shops, and the like; for instance, one could cover or wrap up pallets in some textile material etc., in order not to reveal that they are pallets while profiting by other traits they have (size, cost, abundance, robustness, elasticity, etc.). But that is not what in fact happens with furniture or equipment made up of recycled wooden pallets: that furniture clearly displays its being made up of recycled pallets, and its being made that way contributes to enrich the firms' value proposals.

Items of furniture made of recycled wooden pallets declare, so to speak, "I am made up of recycled pallets": this aspect, which is (let us not forget) a real aspect of that item of furniture, contributes to bestow a sense of sustainability, environmental responsibility, coolness, post-industrial style upon that furniture, and, of course, upon those who choose it.

The big ecological wave of the past decades has radically altered the cultural value landscape and has made the idea of recycling a pallet to create a bed not only more economically convenient than it was before but also morally commendable or even trendy, stylish. That cultural transformation has accompanied pallet furniture from the rented rooms of college students to trendy design offices and exhibitions. There is a lot that EM, CCT, RM, SDL, and other non-modernist approaches to marketing can teach us about this phenomenon. But our point is that their *ontophobia* would prevent them from understanding some key and core aspects of it.

Things, objects, and all concrete entities have vicissitudes: they persist through time, they undergo changes, they are exposed to events, whether these episodes are noticed or not. This pallet was produced in a certain place in Italy, it was used to package and ship certain commodities, it was transported to certain countries, it was exposed to rain and frost. All these real vicissitudes are true of it, whether that is noticed or not. Perhaps, in a different cultural context, such as the 1970s, such traits would have disqualified this pallet, a mere logistics residue, as a candidate material resource for possible furniture, and, if someone had had the idea of building furniture using pallets, they would have concealed that aspect or simply have insisted upon the economic advantages of purchasing such furniture. But in a culturally ecological era like ours, those very vicissitudes (being a side product of the logistics process, for instance) contribute, instead, to the very value of whatever this pallet may become an element of. It is a vicissitude worth telling, a potentially good story, if it is a true story.

In summary, all three postmodernist suggestions rely upon some deeper realist bedrock in order to be made sense of:

- antirealism as an interpretation of product transformation boils down to abracadabra theory, in the absence of an articulate realist ontology;
- postmodernist irony with respect to received categories and values is revealed to be much less relevant than realist ecological concern about the impact of human choices upon the mostly non-human environment;
- emphasis on storytelling relies upon the realist distinction between true and false stories in order to make sense of the credibility and trustworthiness presupposed by any told story.

The phenomenon of creative reuse, far for being a case against realism, proves, once more, its effectiveness and fruitfulness as a theoretical approach.

5.8 Case Study: Experimental Theatre (Reality and Experience)

THE CASE

One of the most significant trends in contemporary societies is the growing involvement of users in value creation.

In the field of the performing arts, for instance,Walmsley (2013) has highlighted that the co-creative trend is one of the most intense modalities of audience engagement in a show. Participation in theatre co-creation enables users to achieve an art benefit, that is, to put themselves to the test with the completion of an art production (Boorsma 2006; Bonazzi, Pastore, Casarin 2021).

The concept of audience-as-artist has proven to be particularly relevant in participatory experimental theatre.

In such a kind of theatre production, performances are unique and one-off, because every representation is different from the preceding one, depending upon the relationships established between actor/s and audience. Moreover, an appetite for intersubjectivity and for the construction of a relational capital emerges amongst those who participate in performances/workshops. Strong emotional involvement unites participants and strengthens their relationships by creating interdependence and mutual support.

In participatory theatre, users take up novel roles and inhabit different situations in which Goffman's (1959) distinction between front-stage and back-stage seems to be annulled. That dimension may be defined as haptic (Bruno 2016), insofar as it encourages a relational modality deriving from the sense of touch, a sense which enables the user to be in contact with things and people. Proximity and absence of physical or architectural barriers involve and invite the audience to participate in the show,

with a foundational role (Bruno 2002). Audiences enter emotional and sensory routes in which time is recreated with each interaction and space is expanded by eluding the classic distinction between stage and parterre. That also allows the audience to be in touch with the genius loci, which directly emerges from the ongoing creative process.

The user takes up the role of the actor and, symbolically, wears a mask, which becomes an instrument of liberation, the overcoming of a limit, the attainment of emancipation from regulations and restrictive norms that may prevent one from behaving naturally or revealing one's real self. In that process of estrangement and de-structuring, individuals are captured as if in a photograph taken unbeknownst to them. That perspective significantly recalls the function of the mask, named 'persona' in ancient Latin theatre (Pizzorno 2008): through the search for a benefit from art, that is, of participation in the completion of a work of art, users generate a representation of their true selves.

Amongst the emerging research in this field we can find the therapeutic function of this form of theatre, group dynamics generated by individual interactions but exceeding the sum of particular contributions, identity construction, and self-knowledge accomplished through active participation, dialectics between the use of a mask and the process of revealing one's self.

What can a realist approach reveal about the intangible world of the Arts?

DISCUSSION

5.8.1 In the Lion's Den

The success of value proposals pivoting upon audience involvement in the creative process of art production seems to provide an excellent case for postmodernist and antirealist conceptions of marketing management. Antirealist tendencies, as we have seen, claim that all that matters, in marketing as in any other context, are not things themselves but rather narratives, identity-play, experiences. And there seems to be nothing there to be talked about in the case of the creative involvement of audiences in experimental theatre, except those very stalking horses of Postmodernism: narratives, identity-play, and experiences. There seems to be no objectual artwork to be exhibited, contemplated, or purchased, and literally nothing existing independently of audience participation; nothing there to experience except the very experiencing of participation, no artwork but the art-working of participants, no final result but the satisfaction of finalising an ephemeral staging of the show, nothing to possess and bring home except memories conditioned by one's mood, age, sensibility. Even during the experience of participation, one of the most attractive aspects seems to be the possibility of taking up roles that are different from the

ones played in ordinary life, of wearing a mask, of letting the quotidian world fade away.

Where is reality in this? Even to raise it in this context may be considered as going too far, or even as asking for trouble: if realism is to be preferred to antirealism when it comes to appellations, creative reuse of disposable logistic materials, or other phenomena related to physical or anyway tangible objects, it seems that antirealism must be a preferable framework to account for intangible or highly symbolic domains. Could we not be content with a truce: material domains to realists, intangible or symbolic ones to antirealists?

One of the reasons for addressing value proposals in the art field, and not even in a tangible and traditional art format (such as painting or sculpture) but in participatory theatre, is precisely that possible equivocation of our purpose: what we intend to suggest with this book is not that intangible contexts of value production are not real and therefore not as interesting or crucial as tangible ones. We are very aware that they are as interesting, or even more interesting in some cases, and, particularly, that the arts are a very important field of marketing research and practice (Colbert 2012). Our purpose is to show that reality is an inescapable reference point of all relations, identities, and experiences, that relations, identities, and experiences ought not to be overshadowed by reference to reality, but rather clarified by it. That is one of the reasons why we do not wish to accept a compromise solution, to the effect that realism is suitable for tangible contexts and antirealism is for intangible or highly symbolic ones.

Another reason for addressing such an intangible and highly rarefied context is our refusal to identify reality with the material domain and to be in the uncomfortable position of deciding whether to leave intangible phenomena at the mercy of antirealism or to proclaim that there are no such domains, that the only entities that really exist are tangible ones. There are tangible and intangible domains, phenomena, objects, relations, fields. And they are all perfectly real. GM marketing policies are as real as concrete Ford cars. Interest rates on loans are as real as apples and pears. And a participatory play staging is as real as a sculpture.

Realism does not boil down to materialism (Harman 2016), and, as we have argued here, some of the most interesting realist programmes are committed to the investigation of intangible phenomena such as language, meaning, convention, and other mental, cultural, or social entities. What our favourite forms of realism are allergic to, is the refusal to take the concrete or material aspects of reality and experience seriously. If radical antirealism claims that there is no such thing as an independent reality, even at the level of basic physical constituents of the world, realism (or at least our favourite brand of realism) draws attention to the fact that reality stretches far beyond tangible and material aspects of the world, to cultural, symbolic, and social ones.

Yet another reason for doubting that addressing the phenomenon of audience participation in experimental theatre is a good idea for realists, is the feeling that, even if it is granted that intangible phenomena may be accommodated in a realist framework, it seems *prima facie* unlikely that reality plays any significant role in this case, that is, in audience experiences in such participatory contexts. All participants seem to be after is an escape from reality, an immersion in an unreal world, the taking up of a role which is far removed from the one they have in real life. But we shall attempt to prove that it is precisely reality that such audiences are looking for, through and through.

5.8.2 Really Staged

The first point we intend to address is whether ephemeral or intangible phenomena, such as the staging of a theatre work or even the collective construction of an event, may be considered as real. Social scientists sometimes turn to philosophers for (typically antirealist) ontological advice, to discriminate between the reality of everyday objects and the status of ephemeral and intangible processes or events. However, we are firmly convinced that, in these matters, formal and informal practices in existing social domains, as well as in the social sciences that study them, provide an excellent guidance for the articulation of a reflection upon what is real and what is unreal.

A cultural manager, a music producer, a theatre director, a musician, an actor, a playwright, or even a lawyer specialising in the cultural sector may personally adhere to postmodernist antirealist claims to the effect that there is nothing more to a song, a performance, a staging, a happening, a theatre play than the processes involved in their production and the experiences of performers, participants, and audiences: that there is nothing, out there, existing beside such experiences and processes.

To that, we would first reply with the by now familiar point that causal dependence is not ontological relativity: it takes the participation of human beings to set up a performance, a happening, a staging, but that does not mean that that performance, that happening, or that staging, once they have been produced, are nothing beyond the experiences of those participating in them or attending them. Such entities, just like any other real entities, have certain traits, which are no more perspective-relative than those of a painting, of a sculpture, or of a temple. For instance, the characteristics of a play, of a performance, or of a happening, may be correctly or incorrectly talked about, they may be correctly or incorrectly remembered or described, they are typically documented (e.g. filmed, photographed, reported, reviewed), in some cases they may be re-enacted.

Even more to the point: playwrights, actors, directors, choreographers, musicians, singers, dancers, as well as their agents, publishers, producers, art dealers, curators, and lawyers know that songs, plays, performances,

situations, and happenings may be, and typically are, copyrighted, owned, sold, temporarily reproduced, adapted, re-enacted, or even plagiarised. They know that plays and books are sold, translated, adapted to screenplays, but that they remain the same plays and books; they know that melodies may be orchestrated in different ways or re-arranged for different instruments, reduced, or used as movie soundtracks while remaining the same melodies.

The art world may be dominated by decades of antirealist Postmodernism and may be reluctant to talk about what goes on in it in realist terms. But copyrights, royalties, image-related contracts, as well as agreements concerning reproduction, screening, and distribution, sale commissions, ownership issues, and many intricate practices and norms show that artworks, no matter how intangible or rarefied, are—and are systematically treated as—everything but mere experience or perspective-relative phantoms: they are in fact treated as robustly real entities.

Even the most impalpable artworks are identifiable and re-identifiable and may be copyrighted, owned, rented, and so forth. And there is nothing scandalous about that: an artwork may be a situation, a performance, a happening, even an idea and still be perfectly real, just like a patent, a brand, or a software script. Of course, the dematerialisation of art in the second half of the past century was carried out, at least by some artists and critics, as a campaign against reification and commodification. But, as any contemporary art fair shows, dematerialisation does not significantly reduce the ontological robustness of artworks, or the range of transactions to which they may be amenable. Dematerialisation entails some form of sublimation but certainly not annihilation.

The same counts for participatory theatre, which heavily relies upon the active involvement of creative audiences or amateur contributors but by no means loses its ontological profile. An experimental and participatory staging of *Oedipus Rex* by *Teatro del Lemming* is still a staging of that particular play: it is that tragedy, and not another one, or no-one, which is staged. Theme, plot, characters, script, and of course title, author, and prestige are the same as the customary ones. The staging is the staging of that tragedy, the collaborative realisation project is a collaborative realisation of that tragedy, the ephemeral and unique event in which that staging consists is marked by its being an instance of *Oedipus Rex*. *Oedipus Rex* is the very same tragedy that is being staged every time, albeit in different fashions, styles, and with different participatory means. Hence, our answer to the possible challenge that there is nothing to experimental participatory theatre other than the experience, the narrative, and the identity play, is that it is of course the very play that is put on. That is a perfectly real entity, and, as we shall see, it occupies the centre of the stage. More than that: the reality of the play is but an element in a constellation of related realities that jointly provide the framework without which the

experiences, narratives, or identity play of participants would lose all grip and significance.

5.8.3 The Realities of Fiction

An important aspect of intangible artworks, that may be neglected or misunderstood in an antirealist framework, is their ontological (and not simply causal) dependence upon the existence of social entities, such as, in particular, institutions, their states, properties, relations, and so forth. Not only is the play *Oedipus Rex* a real entity, without which a project of experimental participatory staging of it would be unimaginable, but its very staging, no matter how experimental, unpredictable, and participatory, takes place against the background of a number of related cultural and social realities.

To begin with, in order for a proper staging of *Oedipus Rex* to take place, other entities must exist.[29] For instance, theatre must exist: first of all, as an acknowledged form of art with its general features, genres, catalogues of texts; secondly, as an institution with a variety of roles, such as author, actor, director, stage designer; third, as a recognised form of art, to be distinguished in certain typical ways from other contexts of human expression.

Staging *Oedipus Rex* through a form of participatory theatre is doing something new and perhaps unprecedented or even unique: what happens on that evening will never happen again in the exact same way. And we enthusiastically adhere to that perspective, which may be extended to the performing arts as a whole. No exactly identical performances have ever been staged.[30] However, the staging of *Oedipus Rex* is the repetition of a canonised action in the institution of theatre: it is precisely a staging, and a staging of *Oedipus Rex*, just like every different performance of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* is a different and unique instance of performing, which is a very well-known type of social act and a performing of that very same music: Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*. Theatre, staging, acting, plays, *Oedipus Rex*: all these entities are presupposed as a background to what goes on on a particular evening in which the *Oedipus Rex* is staged.

The staging is accompanied by institutional communication (posters, newsletters, website, advertising, social media), which, as such, bears a number of institutional markers, such as a logo, perhaps a standard typeset, general references (address, contacts), and all the well-known paraphernalia. If tonight's event did not take place within some already existing and institutionalised theatre framework, it would not make any sense. The sounds, gestures, movements would not have any remotely familiar meaning. If theatre did not exist, or were not acknowledged as an institution, nothing could be staged tonight.

Even if we consider the very dramatic structure of *Oedipus Rex*, we notice that it already presupposes the institution of theatre (originally,

Dionysian celebrations) but also some technicalities related to the concrete evolution of that institution in 5th century BCE Athenian culture, such as the presence of many different actors next to the chorus, a certain structure of the stage, technical possibilities, and so forth.

Moreover, a participatory, and audience-involving, staging of *Oedipus Rex* relies upon facilities (theatres), equipment (lighting control, curtain, scenery flat, black cloth), roles (director, actor), competences (make-up artist, costume designer, stage designer), without which it would be unthinkable. Those facilities, roles, and competences are available because theatre exists and is acknowledged as a social institution in the first place. Society provides for the construction of theatres and for the education and training of various types of theatre professionals. There are drama education programmes, courses, and qualifications for stage directors, stage designers, costume designers, lighting technicians, make-up artists. All these roles correspond to socially acknowledged professions, as well as those of theatre managers, art marketing professionals, audience development consultants, or graphic designers. The experimental and audience-involving staging of *Oedipus Rex* relies upon the whole organisational machine of theatres as social institutions.

5.8.4 Art: The Real Thing

So far, we have focused upon contextual ontological features of staging and theatre, and we have attempted to show that in order for a theatrical representation to take place a whole constellation of social entities (cultural entities, institutions, competences, institutional facilities, and equipment) must already be in place. That may sound interesting for management researchers and practitioners but perhaps reductive for marketing experts. An antirealist marketing expert may argue that it is not enough to indicate that in order for experimental theatre to exist certain institutional realities are presupposed: what counts is the value proposal associated with participatory theatre, that is, whether the ascription of value to such a proposal is in any way related to something beyond narratives, identity play, and relationships. And that seems more difficult to prove. The issue, here, is not simply what is going on, but why what is going on is appreciated by participants.

In order to tackle this issue, we ought to ask ourselves what is valued by participants who join participatory theatre programmes: it is certainly correct to say that they are searching for new and memorable experiences, that they are interested in developing new social relationships, and that they are tickled by the opportunity of identity play, self-reinvention, and self-staging. But such elements can only be made sense of if one keeps reality in one's framework. Theatre experience, identity play, narratives, all these are apparently far removed from a possible reference to reality. However, there are two aspects of the valuing of those experiences that

would be incomprehensible without reference to reality and its role in value proposals. One way to put the point is that fiction is part of the real world in which we live (although what happens in fictions does not really happen).

Firstly, what is true of intangible art in general and of participatory theatre in particular is true *a fortiori* of value proposals related to them. The experimental or participatory staging of a certain play takes place against the background of existing social realities, such as theatre itself and roles and functions related to it. In the same vein, we argue that a value proposal associated with the participatory or experimental staging of a play heavily relies upon the valuing, on the demand side, of such an institution. A person who decides to participate in the experimental and audience-involving staging of *Oedipus Rex* certainly values the first-person experience of being part of an unfolding action, the idea of playing a different role than the one they have off-stage, or of developing new and unpredictable relationships. And such experiences, roles, and relations are certainly memorable, possibly life-changing, or socially fecund. However, the reason for all these valuable things cannot be understood without reference to the participant's commitment to the existence of a certain kind of social reality, namely of theatre as a prominent form of art. It is precisely because participants value theatre as a form of art that they value the experience of being involved in the staging of a play. It is because they believe that theatre is a valuable and prestigious form of expression, that they consider the experience of participating in the putting up of a play as worth having, or even as memorable.

Marketing ought not to forget that commercial communications about a show rest upon a substrate of institutional reputation enjoyed by theatre, as a respectable and prestigious art expression. Without that reputation, participation in that experience would be much more difficult to motivate.

The excitement of joining a theatre cast is in a significant sense the excitement of being part of a group involved in the production of an artwork. It is because what is happening is art, and real art, that it is so exciting: it is not just about the movements, the sounds, the words, the persons. There is an enormous difference between the experience of joining an acknowledged participatory theatre performance and the one of staging the very same play with a group of amateur actors, with an amateur director, and in some recreational or social centre.

From the perspective of the participants, the experience of taking part in the putting on of a play is not simply about the mood, the moment, the unpredictable unfolding of events: it is about all of these things as taking place within an acknowledged artistic context. Participants do not simply experience themselves as interacting with others in certain ways: they experience an interaction with people who they recognise as renowned actors and directors in a fully professional context.

Participants experience the putting on of *Oedipus Rex* in a proper theatre, with professional lighting, preparation, assistance, expectations, demands, quality standards, press coverage, and so forth. And the fact that an experimental staging significantly deviates from traditional staging adds value because experimental art may be valued by participants as a particularly serious kind of art: it is not amateur art, art-entertainment, but connoisseur art. It is artier art, real art. That is what makes the experience so exciting and memorable, and what distinguishes it from well-known amateur theatrical company experiences, or from reciting monologues at home.[31]

One may wonder what the last remarks have to do with the issue of realism versus antirealism. They do, because they show that participants ascribe value to things and events not exclusively because of their subjectively rewarding features: the experience of theatre participation is subjectively rewarding to consumers, because it is (correctly) taken by them as an experience of a reality that they acknowledge as existing and valuable: theatre as a form of art. Their experience is valuable to them because of what they take their experience to be an experience *of*. In the very eyes of consumers, experience does not substitute reality but is validated by reality. What they feel depends upon what they believe to be the case.

Their experience is valued by them because they recognise that what they are participating in is theatre, that it is professional theatre, that it is art, that it is perhaps the most famous play ever staged: *Oedipus Rex*. That is what we insisted upon, in our discussion of the notion of experience in Experiential Marketing: it is correct to underline the role of subjective experiences in consumer behaviour and in value-related contexts in general; but, typically, experience is valued when it is an experience of something of itself considered valuable. Ontology is an essential part of the phenomenology of value.

Imagine, for a moment, that someone has enrolled in an experimental and participatory staging of *Oedipus Rex*: imagine their excitement, anticipation, tension. Now imagine that they suddenly find out that the initiative they are about to participate in was not launched by a real theatre company but rather by an amateur group, that no other participants are real actors, that the director is not a professional director, that the structure hosting the initiative is not a real theatre, and so forth. What would they say to themselves? Many of them would be very disappointed.

The reason why they would be disappointed is not that all they would be left with is their unaltered subjective experience of participation. The very experience of participation would be altered by their sudden awareness of the different status of the project, and it would lose most of its subjective charm. The same would happen if, after participating in such an experiment and subjectively enjoying it, a participant found out that what they believed to be a real theatre company, a good theatre, professional actors and directors were in fact little more than an amateur

class. The very memorability of that experience would be retrospectively undermined.

The subjective features of an experience significantly depend upon what that experience is taken to be an experience of. Jogging may be subjectively rewarding, because it is (also experienced as being) healthy. Work may be subjectively rewarding, when it is (also experienced as being) productive of positive results. And participatory theatre is subjectively rewarding, also because it is (and is experienced by participants as being) a way of contributing to the realisation of a real work of art.

The same counts for identity play: it is certainly true that identity play constitutes one of the most rewarding aspects of participation in theatrical projects. And it is true that wearing masks, both literally and metaphorically speaking, provides an extraordinary opportunity to explore one's identity, to reinvent oneself, and to take up roles that one does not have in ordinary life. However, those very things take place thanks to the common commitment to the existence of a specific social reality—art, and theatre in particular—with special constitutive rules. It is only thanks to their common acceptance of that social entity and of its rules that participants do not experience what they do as a whim or a delusion. The existence of theatre, and participants' subjective allegiance to its existence as a field with special constitutive rules, is a condition of identity play, of role-play, of self-staging, and self-exploration.

Now, of course, Uncle John does not really turn into Oedipus when he goes on stage and neither does a professional actor. And Uncle John does not seriously take himself to be turning into Oedipus when he is on stage (that would be insanity, not theatre). Indeed, realism teaches us, against any form of constructionist antirealism, that reality is not just a type of fiction with very institutionalised acceptance rules. So, there must be some difference between fictional contexts and other contexts. The distinction between antirealism and realism, in this context, is between a position that reduces what is going on to subjective experiences, narratives, and roles, and a position that acknowledges all these very important aspects but points out that they take place against a series of robust ontological assumptions.

Similar comments apply not only to experiential readings of that phenomenon but also to narrative-focused perspectives: participating in the production or staging of a famous tragedy, with a real theatrical company, in a real theatre, with real communication, may have an important role in one's self-definition and in one's self-narrative. Surely, the sheer performative component plays an important role: one puts oneself to the test, one comes to know new persons and finds oneself in a different environment. One even personifies someone else, thereby exploring their feelings, beliefs, and allegiances. That may contribute to characterise someone's personality (in the face of others and for oneself) as adventurous, interesting, eclectic, multifaceted.

However, as in the case of experience, the effectiveness of this narrative relies also upon the existence and social recognition of theatre as a form of art, and upon the recognition, by the participant, that what they are participating in, is real, professional, or even avant-garde, experimental theatre. What is going on is real art. The acknowledgement of such a field, with its status, social role, and constitutive rules, is a precondition for the self-staging. If there were no such rules, or if they were not considered by participants, becoming Oedipus and feeling like him would be experienced as symptoms of mental insanity, pure and simple. The acknowledgement of art as a social entity paves the way to the exploration of one's talents, of the mental life of Oedipus, of certain hidden aspects of one's own personality.

One final word ought to be dedicated to haptic aspects of theatre participation: theatre participation may be considered, for some, as a form of immersion in fiction, of self-forgetting or self-reinvention. But it ought not to be forgotten that what some participants experience and value may also be related to an exploration of theatre from behind the scenes, to the discovery of the technicalities, the tricks, the rehearsals, the real work behind the *mise en scène*: a way of looking at theatre from the perspective of the making of it, to discover the prestidigitator's tricks, and thereby to have the fullest possible experience of theatre itself from the perspective of those who make it; an exploration that provides one with an alternative but surely no less immersive experience of theatre.

5.9 Case Study: Threats and Co-Creative Opportunities in Media Fan Communities (Reality and Subjectivity)

THE CASE

Due to the development of interactive digital technologies, consumers are more and more inclined to multiply web activities, to co-create, to share online content (Croteau and Hoynes 2019). Also in the world of media, brand communities are very active; supported by fans, they have turned into fan communities. TV series, movie series, videogames are multimedia products inspiring widespread media fan communities. Avatar, Star Trek, Harry Potter, Dallas, but also Chinese movies posting their art contents on Tumblr, for example, have generated communities which have been studied by numerous scholars, especially from a sociological perspective. General-interest platforms have developed, as well: for instance, since 2001, the efpfanfic.net platform has been publishing original fanfiction protected by strict anti-plagiarism policies; since 2006 wattpad.com has become a user-friendly community of readers and writers, very popular amongst debuting and young authors; since 2008, fanworld.it has been a platform for short stories, fanfiction, poems, which allows the

opportunity to publish one's own short stories and to leave comments about those written by others.

Academics in the field of Fan Studies tend to acknowledge certain shared aspects of media fans (Burgess and Jones 2018):

i. *they have a passion for the multimedia product (fan object), which becomes part of their identity;*
ii. *their emotional attachment motivates them to co-create products (fan works) linked to the pre-existing multimedia imaginary universe. For instance, stories and screenplays ("fan fiction"), art ("fan art"), videos, songs, games, collector objects, costumes and accessories ("cosplays"), essays. Fan works are exchanged within communities to receive feedback, acknowledgements, and to attract new members;*
iii. *they create interpretive and collaborative communities called 'fandoms', within which they discuss and theorise about their fan objects and share their fan work. Such communities may meet online as well as in special offline conventions;*
iv. *they collect, often avidly, items associated with fan objects, for instance, posters, toys, stickers, gadgets;*
v. *they often wish to have a tangible souvenir of the objects of their fandom and through such items they introduce their children to the multimedia product.*

Certain negative media fan behaviours have attracted the attention of companies and researchers.

Content creation within fan works has been considered as similar to working for a firm, and fans have been compared to a substitute workforce. Fans have been represented as a workforce and, as such, potentially exploited by firms, and as damaging to the regularly employed professional workforce.

The loss of control by firms of official circulating content related to fan objects has boosted fear of potential damage to intellectual property rights. The spreading of non-official content has caused negative publicity on mass media and damage to multimedia products' brand images. Several lawsuits, filed by firms against fandoms, have ensued.

Thanks to their deep product knowledge, fans develop expectations about the features of fictional characters, about plots and narratives, and do not hesitate to express their dissent (also through negative Word of Mouth or electronic Word of Mouth) in case of performances deviating from (or transgressing) their expectations. Sometimes, this can lead to the point where fan complaints and protests result in a form of activism influencing the very decisions made by production firms. There are famous cases of media production companies having to take back their decisions about product development in order to stop protests and fix disruption of their multimedia products.

A stereotype of the media fan has emerged from several sociological surveys: they are fanatics who are far outside socially acceptable practices, with no critical sense, easy to manipulate, and devoted to obsessive mental constructions about the objects of their fandom.

In reality, media fan communities have much in common with ordinary brand communities, of which they are a sub-set. Brand communities are groups of individuals sharing a passion for a branded product, giving birth to an institutionalised community through shared rules and rituals, generating an informal hierarchy, activating regular meeting opportunities during which collective consumption experiences are favoured and value for individual members is generated. Joint participation generates value for community members in various forms: communicative value, by creating and reinforcing social ties and by defining the social identity of members; hedonic value, through pleasure, amusement, and self-esteem; ethical value, because one can help other community members to be happier; utilitarian value, because it is possible to purchase and sell new and second-hand products as well as brand-related services, thereby obtaining economic advantages.

Media fan community engagement practices are similar to brand consumer ones, although the hedonic nature of multimedia products enhances user brand engagement and reinforces their relationship to products. Media fans often participate in debates and blogs, they curate personal and thematic blogs, they create episode charts of their favourite series, they draw up FAQ lists for beginners, they feed wikis to crystallise and archive vast documental materials about the chosen multimedia product, they provide suggestions and new ideas for the development of the series, they take care of neophytes.

Such behaviours may reveal important positive consequences for business marketing. If one looks at media fans from the same perspective adopted for brand consumers, companies can focus on potentially positive behaviour, rather than negative. Media fan communities can be analysed with marketing concepts and instruments used for brand communities. From the marketing perspective, what are the benefits companies can obtain from media fan community behaviour?

i. *earnings deriving from versioning (screenings, TV broadcastings, DVDs, BluRays, pay-per-view, VOD and SVOD), gadgets and accessories, all increase due to the increased sales volumes and prices;*
ii. *opportunities to gather data about user wishes, preferences, and expectations, and new low-cost project ideas increase, thereby making multimedia product development more effective and efficient;*
iii. *in their position as lead users, fans act as catalysers by increasing the amount and intensity of interactions between the brand and regular users;*

iv. *thanks to community activism, fan lifetime value (lifetime value is a prediction of the net profit attributed to the entire future relationship with a customer) increases, because the monthly/yearly purchased value increases, and because fans' profitable lifespans expand;*
v. *after the ceasing of product distribution, fan communities keep interest and awareness alive in audiences and nourish feelings of nostalgia. Brand equity becomes more solid and long-running due to periodic brand reinforcing, favouring the sedimentation and crystallisation of mnestic traces in consumer mental cognitive structures and in their long-term memory. Product lifecycle expands and offers more time and opportunities for possible recycling, which can consist, for instance, in the releasing of new series;*
vi. *multimedia products' brand extension opportunities increase, both during the programming and after its end;*
vii. *product advertising communication costs may decrease, because firms may use viral fan communication as leverage;*
viii. *fan activism constructs market niches, that is, a small-scale market protected by barriers, against the access of competitors. An access barrier consists in the additional costs a potential competitor would incur, in order to become a niche provider, with respect to its incumbents (existing competitors).*

In our case, the source of such an access barrier consists in the engagement, and consequently high satisfaction level, of fans.

The media fan community model, therefore, offers production companies the opportunity of obtaining commercial advantages. That said, the limits of the media fan community model ought to be noted (Simon 2016): although motivated by passion, fans are not professionals.

Certain co-creation forms, deriving from internal fan collaborations, may generate highly innovative pieces of work, but more often amateurs are content with a superficial cut and paste, instead of producing truly original works.

The overall quality of pieces of work proposed by amateurs tends to be low; audiences usually recognise them and tend to avoid them.

Moreover, when fans co-create original products, they have problems with their distribution and acknowledgement by consumers, because consumption patterns appear to change at a much lower rate than production patterns. In fact, a low number of leader products concentrates the vast majority of revenues of the entire market.

In the case of highly capital-intensive sectors, such as the film and video-game industries, that incur high fixed costs, it is unlikely that fan communities will become the main content sources. Companies and their professionals will generally retain a central role, while communities may have an important supporting role.

These limits contribute to lower the purported threat posed by media fan communities to companies.

In summary, instead of stopping fans and having them abstain from their activities, it seems more sensible to collaborate with and encourage them, for instance, by inserting highly suggestive multimedia settings, enriched with fantasy elements, problems to solve, intriguing details, in order to stimulate co-creative activities. That might result in an increase of performance indicators and of referrals and in the faster achievement of companies' economic goals.

Can a realist approach help conceptualise the threats and opportunities posed by fiction to marketing management?

DISCUSSION

5.9.1 One Last Walk on the Wild Side?

In the previous case study, dedicated to experimental participatory theatre, we sought to reject the possible interpretation of the realism/antirealism alternative in terms of tangible and intangible domains, respectively, and to indicate that realism can provide innovative and adequate theoretical instruments to address intangible and highly symbolic domains, such as art production and its experience. In fact, we asked our readers for more: for the acknowledgement that realism can do better than antirealism in accounting for intangible and symbolic domains. That apparently counter-intuitive fact depends upon the distinction between realism and antirealism on one side and tangible and intangible phenomena on the other. The kind of realism we have been subscribing to is one that takes the existence of intangible phenomena as something inescapable and attempts to provide an ontological framework in which to address them.

In the present case study, we find ourselves in a field that, for someone who does not have a philosophical background, may appear even more distant from an intuitive understanding of reality and realist attitudes: fiction. Isn't fiction, intuitively, the contrary of reality? How can realism be better than anti-realism at understanding what is not real?

This reading of the situation rests upon a coarse oversimplification of the issue at stake. Realism is not the tendency to focus upon the specific part of human experience that revolves around reality, and antirealism is not the opposite tendency to highlight the relevance of the domains of human experience that do not refer to it. Realism is rather the attitude of considering the relevance of reference to reality in all sorts of domains.

There is a sense in which some kinds of antirealism may be understood as claiming that all entities are somehow fictional, that is, fashioned, shaped, or fabricated;[32] and, perhaps, there is a sense in which some kinds of realism may be taken to claim that all we ever refer to, including fictional entities, is real. However, surely, no realist or antirealist philosopher, no matter how radical, would dismiss the question about the

status of fiction as irrelevant, simply based upon their general (realist or antirealist) philosophical assumptions.

Fiction is certainly part of human experience, and, even more precisely, it is part of human experience exactly *qua* fiction. This means that, not only are there stories about fictional characters that never in fact existed (or even that never could exist) or about events that never took place (or never could take place); but rather many, if not most, such stories are explicitly produced, categorised, consumed, and experienced as fictional. No writer, publisher, editor, screenplay writer, actor, or film producer expects readers or viewers to believe that Hogwarts, Gondor, Gandalf, Voldemort, or the battles and confrontations described in the respective fictional stories really took place. The same counts for fictional stories set in familiar places and times and for historical or social background practices and events, for example, nineteenth-century Paris for Balzac or Flaubert, or Napoleonic Europe for Tolstoy.[33]

Fiction is not simply a possible part of human experience: it accounts for a significant share of contemporary economies, from publishing to movie production and distribution, to merchandising, versioning, home video, video-gaming, collecting, theme-parks, tourism, advertising, and so forth. Characters, stories, and fictional contexts are continuously invented but also copyrighted, purchased, sold, versioned, adapted. No matter how antirealist one may be, it is hard to win a lawsuit regarding the violating of intellectual property rights about a comics character by arguing that that character does not really exist, so that there is nothing in the world that such property rights and the respective lawsuit can ever be about.

Indeed, the last part of this case study will address what can appear as a paradox of fictional entities: on one side, they are indeed fictional and experienced as such, at least by most people,[34] but, on the other, they are part of our shared social environment and are common reference points in society to the extent that inventing and publishing successful fictional characters or stories, or purchasing their copyrights, may be profitable, and contracts regarding intellectual property rights, copyright, versioning rights, distribution rights, translation rights, and so forth are no less compelling than those regarding real estate properties or mining industries. The point of distinguishing between realism and antirealism, in the philosophy of management and marketing, is also about the ability to account for the relevant social practices and to provide theoretical instruments with which to analyse and even improve them. We shall attempt to show that realism provides better categories than antirealism for a correct understanding of media fan fiction and related phenomena.

5.9.2 Ontological Challenges

Media fan communities (MFCs) have been described in the introduction to this case study as representing a number of opportunities and threats. When we consider MFCs and similar phenomena, we are confronted

with a crucial ontological problem which has emerged numerous times in intellectual and social debates: whether the existence of communities or groups is a mere theoretical simplification, and whether, to understand the properties and dispositions of a group or community, it is necessary and sufficient to describe the properties of their individual members and the types of interactions emerging from such properties; or whether, *au contraire*, communities and groups are entities in their own right, endowed with properties and dispositions that are irreducible to those of their individual members plus their interactions. Economic theory has mostly met such ontological questions in their epistemological form, for instance, in the debate between methodological individualism and its opponents, as a means of explaining economic and social phenomena in general (Weber 1922; von Hayek 1942).

In philosophy proper, the natural conviction of postmodern contemporary society has sometimes been summarised as the assumption that nothing exists besides bodies and languages (Badiou 2006, 1). In this case, we see ourselves confronted with the theoretical issue of explaining opportunities and threats that may not exclusively be ascribed to individual media fans or the fan fiction they individually produce and share but to the very media fan communities they are members of.

MFCs do not appear to behave as simple agglomerates or sets of individuals who happen to have the same or similar attitudes and dispositions, at some time, with respect to certain forms of fictional characters or stories. MFCs are communities, and not mere sets of individuals with the same attitudes, because they behave as such: for instance, as we have seen, MFCs share values, norms, rules, and practices; they have certain policies, hierarchies, formal and informal procedures. Such procedures, once they have emerged and have been established, regulate the very behaviour of community members and their interactions, including those of their original proponents. They can also outlive the membership or participation of their original proponents. Those very values, rules, and procedures result in certain types of output. They tend to attract certain types of fans, to induce certain kinds of responses, in compliance with their formal or informal norms; they also promote or discourage certain attitudes, evaluations, and forms of socialisation.

MFCs with certain values and principles relate to fiction products in different ways, for example, by fostering or by censoring certain kinds of reactions, for instance, by WOM and eWOM. The behaviour of one and the same individual may differ greatly, depending on whether that same individual is acting as a member of a certain MFC which upholds certain values and adopts certain principles, or whether that same individual is acting on his or her own, or as a member of a different MFC, with different values, rules, and principles. That is why the issue of value co-creation in media fan communities (as well as in certain types of brand

communities) cannot be addressed solely in terms of generalisations over individual beliefs and attitudes.

The theses we would like to uphold here are as follows:

i. MFCs have traits and trajectories of their own, partly depending upon their values, norms, and structural traits and not simply upon the properties and dispositions of their individual members;
ii. the behaviour of MFC individual members partly depends upon their being members of those communities;
iii. the ways in which MFCs interact with other social groups and institutions, as well as with individuals who may or may not be their members, depend upon their properties as communities and not simply upon the total sum of their members' dispositions and interactions.

This means that communities are not simply aggregates but also subjects and environments. They act as communities, they interact as communities, and they promote and constrain certain kinds of behaviours. It is not simply the individual creative members of different MFCs who pose threats or represent opportunities for fiction producers but rather MFCs themselves, with their sizes, policies, procedures, and outreach.

Certain MFCs, having certain kinds of values and principles, may offer opportunities for companies because of the fact that they have those kinds of values and principles as communities. Therefore, it is an important point of MFC analysis, as well as of the analysis of many other communities, including businesses, to highlight features shared by some MFCs, correlations between those features and the type of output they have, the kinds of users they attract, the sorts of platforms they prefer for communication and content sharing, their life-cycles, and so forth. Fanfiction is one of the typical outputs of MFCs. Its emergence depends in part upon the structure of MFCs and upon the types of interactions they host or promote. The quality and the value of fanfiction also depend upon the practices fostered by MFCs; they depend upon their regulations and procedures, upon the presence or absence of internal passages, such as reviews, filters, and rankings.

One might feel reluctant to embrace an ontology that acknowledges the existence and causal irreducibility of communities, besides that of individuals, with their beliefs and desires. But the ontological question is not so easy to avoid because, as many philosophers have shown, even if one refuses to assume the existence and causal relevance of meta-individual entities, because of their purported ontological redundancy, one might have similar problems with individuals, whose preferences, computational abilities, and information states may be considered as redundant with respect to brain states, temporary behavioural dispositions, or what not (Ross 2005; Ross, Sharp, Vuchinich, and Spurrett 2008).

Having an articulate ontological framework certainly provides theoretical tools with which to address the behaviour of consumers and users who are organised in communities or in other semi-institutional groups. It may elevate the level of analysis from the perspective of individual preferences and belief sets to that of group policies, group behaviour, group fidelity or loyalty, group performance, and so forth. Besides, it takes an ontological reflection to account for the fact that the very preferences and information states of individuals are transformed by their becoming members of certain groups and institutions, or for the fact that communities retain certain typical traits even if individual members join or leave or have certain roles at different times.

5.9.3 Non-Contiguous Communities

With the emergence of the world wide web, the existence and the causal autonomy of communities has become more independent of physical contiguity and direct face-to-face interaction. Physical distance has lost most of its importance, largely because of the disappearance of long-distance information transferral costs (think of the difference from traditional mailing costs, for instance). We are, therefore, witnessing the emergence of super-individual entities (communities) whose traits and causal patterns are more and more independent of the physical localisation of their members in certain places (a certain city, region, state) and are based, instead, upon much more abstract aspects, such as the use of certain platforms, shared interest in certain themes or topics, and the mastering of certain competences (including IT skills and language skills). The emergence of such communities boosts the outreach potential (and the related threats) of all sorts of brands, crossing national borders, but also national legislations, with respect to differences in intellectual property rights.

How are disputes about misappropriation, abuse, or plagiarism to be framed in a context in which communities have such a transnational or rather non-national status? Must they be converted into individual lawsuits against individual transgressors? How can a philosophy of management and a philosophy of law cooperate to define the status and responsibility of such communities?

If we turn to opportunities, we notice that the emancipation of community forming from physical contiguity boosts the creative potential of MFCs, reduces time-delays due to series dubbing, subtitling, and distribution, channels different sensibilities (related to different regions, cultures, social groups) together, and allows the emergence of unexpected syntheses and creative transformations, including possible cultural shocks.

A media fan community accepting comments and contributions (including fanfiction) from all over the world may have entries from New Zealand and Mexico, India and Denmark, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates, thereby permitting a concentration of competences and

sensibilities that may outperform one of the very companies producing the original series. And, for members, participating in such a world-wide community may strengthen their ties to that fiction and to other members.

The possibility of co-creation and value addition may expand on one side or grow out of control (for firms) on the other. Synchronisation, sharing, information transfer, real-time feedback, all become the rule, not the exception, when interaction does not depend upon direct physical proximity or nationality. And the marketing potential of such a transformation, for businesses, cannot be overestimated. This crucial point cannot be fully grasped without looking at the ontological make-up of contemporary communities with respect to that of pre-digital communities. The digital era permits new forms of interaction not only between individuals and other individuals but also between individuals and communities or groups, between different communities, and between communities and individuals.

In order to profit from the opportunities related to media fan communities and to minimise their negative aspects, it is necessary to understand what conditions, at the level of communities (platforms used, procedures, protocols, forms of supervision, review, rating, filtering, types of accepted formats, requirements, membership admission criteria, intellectual property policies) are correlated to a high level of value co-creation, customer lifetime value, to a positive attitude towards the product, and what other conditions are instead correlated to reputation damage, loss of control of a brand without any compensation, high level of animosity towards possible deviations from fan expectations, or plagiarism. An ecology of digital environments can explore the environmental conditions of the emergence and conservation of new value, which may be beneficial for businesses, too, and what other conditions instead are detrimental to it.

5.9.4 The Object-Relatedness of Media Fan Communities

The case of MFCs does not only pose a theoretical question regarding the existence and independence conditions of digital communities; it also poses a more specific question related to their objectual conditions. 'Objectual' does not boil down to 'material, in this context, but it includes a broad number of entities existing independent of the perspective of individual users, whether or not they are material in a traditional sense of the word. We have already evoked the relevance of objects to the stabilising of human relations and forms of coexistence and communities while discussing the one-sidedness of SDL and RM. But it is time to revive the line of argument that we have, in part, derived from Michel Serres's (1980) notion of quasi-object. In order for basketball teams to exist, basket-balls, baskets, basketball fields, but also basketball rules, basketball facilities, basketball players, and a shared understanding of the goals of the game must be in place: a basketball game is not simply a game

played by individuals who decide to use certain things (balls, baskets) in certain ways (following certain standard rules, counting points in certain ways, etc.).

The same counts for MFCs: their existence depends not only upon the accessibility of original series through the parallel widespread availability of the relevant objects (devices like TV-sets, computers, decoders, tablets, smartphones, etc.); it also depends upon the widespread availability of devices, platforms, software, and skills related to participation in such communities.

Fans of a certain series need devices to watch it but also need devices (perhaps the same devices, more probably different ones) to connect to their favourite MFC; they need competences and skills to download the relevant material; they need software to produce their own fanfiction, to share it, and to stay in touch with their fellow media fans. They certainly need internet access with an affordable price, with a certain data-carrying capacity and speed, stability, and so forth.

All these entities (laptops, smartphones, but also software, mobile and landline networks, platforms, etc.) are prerequisites for the existence of MFCs and must be taken into account when discussing the value, opportunities, and threats they pose. For instance, the originality, quality, creativity, and internationality of fanfiction, as well as its outreach, depend upon the local, regional, national, or global availability of the relevant devices, software, and skills, as well as on the carrying capacity of the internet in different areas of the world. They cannot be explained merely in terms of individual motivations, competences, and preferences. The same counts for the dissemination potential of the relevant platforms, which depends upon the availability of internet access and devices, as well as on language and IT competences worldwide.

This is just a sketch, because, in fact, one could develop proper analyses of the correlation between the influence of MFCs and the widespread availability of highly portable multifunctional devices such as smartphones that are used by students, commuters, and other individuals not only in their free-time proper but also in time gaps between other activities and which can be used to access MFC portals.

The existence of fiction is unthinkable without the existence of a broadcasting system (from ancient *aoidoi* to medieval *troubadours* to twentieth-century radios to contemporary tablets and smartphones), and it is stabilised by them. In the same sense, the existence of media fan communities and fanfiction causally depends upon the widespread availability of standardised and standardising objects that fans can operate to access content, to participate in debates, to produce or edit partly new content, and to publish it. The opportunities and threats related to contemporary MFCs' fanfiction production largely depend upon the availability and cost of the relevant instruments for fiction production among fans, of the relevant competences to produce quality fanfiction, and of the format of the

relevant output. If devices, software, competences, and so forth become less difficult to obtain and to master, fanfiction may attain a completely different standard and role in contemporary societies.

A realist attitude may help us develop a concrete analysis of the type of quasi-objects involved, without falling prey to the abstract distinction between tangible objects, like laptops, optical fibres, and smartphones, and less tangible ones, such as software, portals, platforms, and internet subscriptions. The existence of a certain access protocol, procedure, policy, on a certain fanfiction platform, is as relevant as the features of the device a user is operating in order to join it.

Finally, and more controversially, perhaps: the existence of MFCs largely depends upon that of fictional characters and of the fictional stories themselves to which such communities and their members make reference. Gandalf, Harry Potter, Batman, the Flash are the shared reference points of MFCs, what such communities are all about. Fictional characters represent a very special ontological layer of social reality, a delicate layer of entities that do not belong in reality proper but are acknowledged by different individuals and even by institutions as shared reference points of both fictional and ordinary discourse. When two Batman fans talk about the Joker and discuss whether he—the Joker—is more or less dangerous than, say, Penguin, it is the Joker and Penguin they are jointly referring to, not some individual mental picture or something alike.

If a comics publisher releases a strip in which its main character meets a character from a series whose intellectual property rights it does not hold, lawsuits may follow because that strip is also about that very character, it is not simply a series of pictures and signs on paper. Once fictional characters (and fictional places, situations, events) have been invented and published, they tend to be established and to become common reference points. They also may be copyrighted in such a way that one is allowed to talk and write about them but not to earn money by using certain versions of their stories without asking for permission. The fact that such characters, situations, and events are fictional should not confuse us as to the real existence of such fictional entities in society. If, for instance, a certain firm produces an unauthorised comic series in which there is a character who comes from a different planet, flies, is invulnerable, pretends to be an ordinary person, works in a newspaper, and so forth, that series and that character may be recognised as being unauthorised fiction *about Superman*. The ontological furniture of societies features bank accounts, avatars, property rights, brand policies, and—yes—also fictional characters, whose conditions of existence cannot be dismissed by simply claiming that they do not really exist. And reality also plays a different role, in fiction: even if the characters may not really exist, most of what goes on in fictions does exist in some form and is borrowed from reality: also in fiction, there are human beings, who walk, talk, think, act, work, relax, collaborate, betray, conspire, murder. There might be magic

or other aberrations from reality but to a limited extent. And the classic hallmarks of reality are preserved. For instance, also in fiction, consistency plays a crucial role: what has happened in one scene is part of the background of the subsequent scenes. In order to delete it from the narrative, it must be disavowed in some way, for instance, as a dream, a hallucination, or a lie. The departure of fiction from reality may be significant but not total (Ferraris 2013, Ch. V).

5.9.5 MFCs as Documental Platforms

Another more abstract aspect of MFCs, which is very relevant to addressing the issue of the opportunity and threats related to them, is their being exceptionally prolific document producers and efficient archives: those features play a crucial role with respect to the very ontological status of fictional characters and fictional entities more generally.

MFCs publish, update, archive, and store enormous quantities of documents, from versions, to comments, to theoretical discussions, to interpretations, conjectures, backstage gossip, and so forth. Depending upon their rigour and outreach, they can achieve a documental breadth and depth surpassing even that of the authors, producers, and managers of the relevant fictions. That distinguishes contemporary media fan communities from traditional ones, whose forms of interaction did not allow for such a documental layering. Such a documental intensity raises important issues with respect to the possible opportunities and threats they represent for official businesses.

Whereas a fan-reproduction of a Gucci product is a piece of counterfeiting, because of the ontology of branded products, a story featuring characters from a certain fiction, written by a fan, may count as an authentic piece of work. Or is that not possible? What are the identity conditions, if any, of a piece of fiction, and under what circumstances does something undistinguishable from a certain piece of fiction count as a genuine piece of that fiction? Is the distinction between authentic and counterfeited products valid with respect to fiction? How is it possible to distinguish real (!) fiction from a fake fiction, from forgery, from make-believe fiction?

Take, for instance, ancient Greek epics, with the stories making up the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. We are told that stories now channelled into those two poems were probably told in different variations over a long period, by more or less professional *aoidoi*. Many alternative versions of different episodes or characters coexisted, some of them giving prominence to certain characters, others removing them altogether (think of Palamedes, for instance). Transcription of a certain version of an epic story and its use in education and literary debates established a canon, obfuscating alternatives. However, in the age of Attic tragedy, different versions of those very same myths circulated again, revived or reinvented by acclaimed poets.

What led to the acceptation of those alternative versions was, in fact, partly related to the documental force of Attic tragedy, its textual proliferation and dissemination, the breadth of its audience, the reputation of its authors, its repetition in different cities. Of course, what led to such a proliferation and documenting was also the high sophistication of Attic tragedy, its ability to address deep-felt issues and to become a classic standard. But documental force cannot be underestimated. Modern motion pictures have a similar ability to establish acceptable versions by producing and circulating alternative stories (think of the different versions of the nature of Patroclus' and Achilles' friendship).

The Head of Marketing of a fiction business may wonder: can highly documented fanfiction become a serious threat to original fiction? Can it take a lead role in the shaping of characters, circumstances, and patterns? Can it become accepted by large audiences as a legitimate and authentic development of fictional stories? Or is it completely marginal, with a mere affective role, as a form of amateur exercise by fiction fans? More importantly, what does the answer depend upon? Simply upon differences in quality? Upon authorship? Upon prestige, and the ability to recognise authentic contributions and distinguish them from merely original ones? The ontological status of fictional characters and the possible sources of fictional events about them partly depend upon legislative backgrounds, audience loyalty, innovation leadership, technological superiority.

As we have already seen, the existence of MFCs and also of fanfiction depends upon the existence and availability of devices and skills which are apt to produce them and to consume them. In the 1950s, MFCs would not have posed a serious threat to Hollywood majors, simply because editing devices and skills were rare and expensive, and because communication was much. But the cheap availability of devices, software, tutorials, and supervision, together with the emergence of a sort of parallel and informal distribution system (MFC platforms), have determined a serious shift. In the 1950s, the most that fans could do was *talk* (or *write*) about their favourite movies. If someone had written a piece of fanfiction, it would have been technically incomparable with the original, but, also, it would not have been circulated, documented, or archived anywhere. Today, MFCs have platforms that function almost as publishers because of their ability to produce, circulate, and archive documents. Hence, they might threaten the monopoly of traditional content producers, especially if the expertise of their members increases and if legal systems have relevant gaps.

As fanfiction is about fictional characters and events, the existence of platforms that publish, circulate, and archive unauthorised fiction may pose a threat, especially at the point when fanfiction authors develop skills and obtain technology that are not too distant from those of official producers. One possible strategy for copyright holders is to remain the leading producers by increasing their standards and keeping a high-quality

advantage in terms of technology, sophistication, and scripts. Another possible strategy is to demand that MFCs be treated as proper publishers and be subjected to severe publishing laws, including all copyright and intellectual property laws. A third way may be to involve media fans more in their activities and to open themselves up to their skill and passion, thereby trying to channel them into their new productions and to include them as proper contributors, whose input is acknowledged by the ontological masters of those characters and stories.

Notes

1. It should be noted that the second, metaphorical, use of 'perception'/'perceiving' may derive from the first, literal one but does not conceptually rest upon it: things can be metaphorically perceived as being in a certain way without being perceived at all in the first, literal, sense of the word. For instance, global markets may perceive certain currency fluctuations as signs of financial instability, although currency fluctuations are not things that someone can literally perceive (one can perceive reports about them, of course).
2. Cf. Ferraris (2014a, 190): "unamendability manifests itself primarily as a phenomenon of resistance and contrast. I can embrace all the theories of knowledge in this world, I can be atomistic or Berkeleyan, postmodernist or cognitivist, I can think, with naïve realism, that what is perceived is the true world or I can think, with the Vedanta doctrine, that what is perceived is the false world. The fact remains that what we perceive is unamendable, it can not be corrected: if the sun is up, sunlight is always blinding. There is no interpretation to be opposed to these facts: the only alternative are sunglasses".
3. Although it cannot be perceived that it is an authentic *MaxMara* label and not a counterfeited one. Being a real *MaxMara* label is a relational social property that obviously depends upon something's being in the right historical and causal relation to *MaxMara*'s labelling processes.
4. Cf. Cadwalladr (2017); Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison (2018); Rosenberg, Confessore and Cadwalladr (2018); Valsania (2018); Simonetta (2018).
5. Of course, these remarks are meant to address the pre COVID-19 crisis. However, the radical decrease in tourism in Venice, which was amongst the highest in Italy, has led some tourists to decide to visit Venice in 2020 to have a glimpse of the city without mass tourism.
6. For the meaning of 'perception' as ascribing a certain meaning of value to something, cf. earlier discussion.
7. Gilmore and Pine (2007, 87): "Nothing offered by any business is authentic; it's all artificial and utterly fake"; "Businesses can render their inauthentic offerings as authentic". "All human enterprise is ontologically fake", yet, "output from that enterprise can be phenomenologically real—that is, it is perceived as authentic by the individuals who buy it".
8. Gilmore and Pine (2007, 93): "What one person experiences as completely authentic, another may view as completely inauthentic, and a third may be somewhere in between". And, the "sole determinant of the authenticity of any economic offering is the individual perceiving the offering. Call it a corollary to the Authenticity Paradox—because our experiences with offerings happen inside of us, we become the sole arbiter of what is authentic for us" (2007, 92).
9. UNESCO (2015): "Overall State of Conservation: The Mission considered that the general state of conservation of the property composed by

the Historic City of Venice and the Venice Lagoon—is currently impacted upon by a number of factors which represent both proven and potential danger to the Outstanding Universal Value of the property in accordance with paragraph 179 of the Operational Guidelines and make its authenticity and integrity very vulnerable"; "The Mission recommends that the comprehensive measures should be implemented by the State Party to reverse and eliminate any potential threats to the Outstanding Universal Value of the property, as well as to prevent any potential loss of authenticity and integrity".

10. Carbone and Sorrentino (2004).
11. The role of institutional proclamations should not be underestimated: a wine may meet all conditions mentioned in production guidelines, but if it is not submitted for examination and proclaimed a DOCG, it is not a DOCG wine.
12. Ferraris (2013, 2016) underlines the relevance and priority of reality to human practices and meaning bestowals, by characterising realism as a "positive" stance, that is, as a reactive one.
13. Think of the political debates surrounding the introduction and download of tracking applications with respect to the COVID-19 health crisis.
14. This is a relevant difference from other countries or cultures, like China or Italy.
15. What would happen to commuter habits if average temperatures, in Dutch winters, sank by 15°C?
16. Being intrinsic or extrinsic is a triadic property: it holds good of a trait with respect to an entity's instantiating a concept; it does not simply hold good of a relation between a trait and an entity.
17. And by that, of course, we do not mean that it is of the same size as these objects, but that its size falls within a certain approximate size range: those pieces of furniture are between one-third and three times the size of a pallet. If you find that to be irrelevant, imagine how very different it would be to construct a bed or a wardrobe out of recycled products with the size of a coin.
18. For instance, a warehouse worker might notice at first sight that this pallet is darker than average, that it is older than one year, that it has been exposed to heavy rain or frost, that it is in bad condition, etc. But the warehouse worker would not thereby be seeing the pallet differently or seeing something different than the layperson. On the contrary, the very same traits that do not reveal anything particular to the layperson reveal something more about the pallet to a connoisseur. Just like a watermelon sounds the same to the layperson as it does to the greengrocer, when knocked upon, but its sounding thus and so reveals its degree of ripeness to the greengrocer and not to the layperson. This remark leaves aside the phenomenon of heightened discrimination abilities in trained subjects as well as in particularly sensitive ones (e.g. the ability to discriminate shades of colour, sound pitches, scents in a perfume etc.)
19. We are not claiming that perception always plays a central role, but it does, in many cases and for the important reasons that we have attempted to highlight.
20. There are exceptions, of course: a distant volcano eruption cannot be perceived but can alter climate; a virus cannot be perceived, but can kill one, and so forth.
21. Perhaps, the most famous example which can be cited is the construction of an emergency device to keep levels of carbon dioxide under control on the Apollo 13 moon unit, after its accident. Astronauts on board the lunar module were instructed by a team of engineers on the ground to fashion improvised air filtration canisters by using materials they had in the module, such as plastic, covers of procedure manuals, and of course lots of duct tape.

22. NB: of course, it is not the tree itself which inspires the perceiver to use it. Trees do not do such things, any more than hares inspire hungry people to hunt them and eat them. Affordances and invitations ought not to be mistaken for proper requests addressed by inorganic or organic entities to humans to use them in certain ways. That would be ridiculous.
23. Of course, in some cases, much more sophisticated forms of inspection or testing are needed, in order to reveal possible creative uses or reuses of certain types of objects or materials. That is what labs are for.
24. This is a purely factual statement and has nothing whatsoever to do with the claim that it is morally legitimate to breed non-human animals, to cultivate plants, to use them as sources of nourishment or labour, etc. As a matter of fact, as regards labour, slavery has subjected certain humans to treatments similar to those suffered by non-human animals, and, in other exceptional circumstances, certain humans have been used as food, too.
25. However, it might not be entirely accurate any more: through human-driven genetic selection, millennia of agriculture and breeding have modified some traits of domesticated cows, chickens, pigs, rabbits, and so forth in order for them to become more productive sources of food. For instance, certain cow races have been genetically selected to produce more milk, others to be sources of more tender meat. Corn, grapes, and most vegetal species cultivated to be used as vegetables have been modified even more heavily. In this sense, the cow grazing on that field is as it is also because it is expected to become the source of some kind of food (milk, meat, both). This, again, is a factual statement.
26. That might explain part of the fun of writing a book on philosophical realism and management, too.
27. Price also plays a significant role (cf. the following discussion).
28. Remember our insistence upon the difference between ontological independence and causal independence, in Part 1. Rivers are ontologically independent of human thoughts, because there being or not being a river in a certain place does not depend upon what humans think (believe) about the matter; however, rivers are not causally independent of human thoughts because there being or not being a river in a certain place may depend upon whether humans think they would be better off if the course of the river were diverted. For instance, that there is a Venetian lagoon with certain features does not ontologically depend upon the fact that humans think there is one, but it does causally depend upon the fact that rivers were diverted, canals were dug, a city was built, because humans thought they would be better off by carrying out all those works.
29. Those social institutions, just like any other worldly entities, are subject to transformations. Theatre has changed a lot since Thespis's chariot, but so have agriculture and footwear.
30. And no one has ever had the exact same experience of the very same performance due to differences in seating position, age, mood, company, health condition (not to mention education, gender, personal taste).
31. You may want to compare the excitement of participating in a theatre staging with the excitement one feels at one's birthday. All the friends, the relatives, the reception are part of the exciting experience. But that excitement is based upon the fact that it is really one's birthday: that what is going on is motivated by one's having their birthday. It is not simply about a group of people who happen to be in the same place at the same time, eating, drinking, and chatting. Of course, fiction can be compared to other aspects of human life only from specific perspectives, therefore the similarity must be limited.

32. For instance, Wittgenstein famously claimed that an answer to a mathematical question about an unproved property of numbers may not differ, in kind, from that of a poet with respect to his fictional characters. Cf. Wittgenstein (1956, S. V, § 9).
33. There is an open debate about the status of places and events featuring in fictional stories: for example, whether Rastignac's Paris and Holmes's London are indeed Paris and London or fictional cities with strong similarities to the real ones. Similar arguments apply to professions (tailor, minister), institutions (municipality, parliament), technologies (watches, chariots), and social events (revolutions, financial crises etc.) that appear in those fictions.
34. There are grey areas and borderline cases: few people seriously believe the "Harry Potter" series to be about real people and events; some believe the "Beowulf" stories to be about real people and events; most people believe the Iliad to be about real places and partly, but not totally, about real people and events. Opinions may change in time, for instance, due to archaeological or other types of discoveries. However, a story or a character being fictional does not depend upon someone taking it to be. Whether there really was a Trojan war does not depend upon the way *the Iliad* is read nowadays.

Conclusion

We have shown that reference to reality is a philosophically legitimate attitude, that it can contribute to articulating an intellectually sophisticated attitude, and that it can become part of a fruitful approach to the social sciences in general and to marketing theory in particular. We have also shown that rejection of reality, and of reference to it, rested upon an oversimplified interpretation of certain tenets of contemporary philosophy and culture.

In our refutations of postmodernist antirealist arguments and in our discussions of case studies, we have rehabilitated unfairly discredited concepts (reality, thing, object, independence). Reality has re-emerged as a fully legitimate notion and as a focal point for human thought, language, and behaviour, rather than appearing as a mere chimera. Things have been revived in quite literal terms—the veneer of dullness, insignificance, and inertia which connoted them in postmodernist antirealist thought has been peeled off their surface, letting them display their fecundity. We have sought to carefully distinguish objects from the epistemological objectivity of beliefs and statements and to appreciate them in their own right. We have articulated the ontological distinction between different sorts of objects (cultural objects, social objects, other types of objects) and acknowledged objects as indispensable building blocks for the emergence and stabilisation of human relationships and practices, thereby reversing the postmodernist antirealist tenet that objects are whatever they are only by virtue of the roles and meanings bestowed upon them by contingent human conventions. We have vindicated the ontological independence of reality against all epistemological and linguistic reductionism. And we have vindicated it as a challenging and fruitful element, not as a theoretical full stop.

Through philosophical arguments and case studies, we have introduced or highlighted relatively novel notions, like emergence (cases: Food Farming, Van Moof), invitation, and affordance (Recycling Pallets); we have underlined the relevance for marketing of previously underestimated or unilaterally understood phenomena like perception (Diffusione Tessile, Authentic Venice), invariance, resistance, unamendability (Recycling

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Pallets, Diffusione Tessile). We have addressed emergence as a genuine process of ontological expansion, generation, and articulation (Van Moof, MFCs), in opposition to postmodernist antirealist forms of reduction of (in particular) social entities and institutional entities to linguistic or perspectival factors. Invitation has played an important role in our reconsideration of the relationship between subjective and objectual aspects of human creativity (Recycled Pallets): as case studies have shown, the real traits of objects play an enormous role in the very processes that generate innovation, adaptation, transformation, co-creation, and creative reuse. Affordances have had much to say about the environmental aspects (opportunities and constraints) of use and of value generation (Recycled Pallets). We have shown that perception is a rich, informative, tenacious, and structured source of information, which cannot be done away with by making reference to differing linguistic conventions, cultural habits, or theoretical assumptions. Perception has emerged as a sort of common ground, independent of contingently different conventions and institutions (Diffusione Tessile, Recycled Pallets).

We have also suggested that it would be useful to reverse postmodernist antirealist approaches to important marketing issues, like experience (Venice, Participatory Theatre), authenticity (Venice), identity (Diffusione Tessile, Participatory Theatre, MFCs), relation, and co-creation (Recycled Pallets). In doing so, we have highlighted the centrality of reality to an understanding of value (Facebook) and, even more importantly, we have attempted to show that reality is not some chimerical residue lying at the bottom of social, institutional, and linguistic processes, but it is with us at all times and at every level of experience and interaction, as a rich and structured network of interrelated domains, ranging from the physical to the virtual (Participatory Theatre, MFCs).

We have also sought to show that there need be no trade-off between reference to reality, on the one hand, and values that have emerged or have been vindicated in the past decades of philosophical and cultural debates, such as pluralism, diversity, or inclusion. And that those values are not in contrast with, but are protected by, a strong sense of sincerity and accuracy (Facebook). We have demonstrated that the opposition between realism and those values derived from the adoption of a misguided postmodernist antirealist perspective, and that ambiguous policies with respect to truth and sincerity, endanger reputation and corporate value (Facebook). We believe as well that reference to reality has cast a fresh light upon the distinction between marketing proper, as pivoting upon value proposals and sales techniques (Recycled Pallets).

We would now like to conclude our efforts by pointing at some further questions and research directions that, we believe, lie ahead of us.

Firstly, we consider it legitimate and sensible to ask whether there could be something like a systematically realist approach to marketing and, if

so, what such an approach might be: whether reference to reality may be more than one indispensable aspect of human thought and behaviour, but rather its most fundamental feature. Correlatively, as to marketing, we wonder whether reference to reality may be more than one unavoidable aspect of all value creation and value proposal, but rather their main and most fundamental aspect. More specifically, we also wonder what would follow from the adoption of a systematically realist approach to marketing and whether such an approach would be preferable to a more generic awareness of the relevance of reality for human thought and behaviour.

A second question is whether it is possible for marketing theory to remain non-committal as regards the significant theoretical differences between alternative realist positions: as antirealism is a label used to tag very different positions, realism is perhaps almost as elastic a category. In our illustration of the credentials and fruitfulness of realism, we have had to leave in the background the crucial differences between different realist proposals. However, such differences are real and, as with everything real, they do matter. Should a realist approach to marketing be committed to a specific realist perspective (a specific social ontology, a specific conception of perception), or should it choose the most suitable strategies and concepts from different realist research programmes, *à la carte*? If it should choose, then the further question would arise, what perspective would be preferable and why? Could the suitableness of a certain realist perspective for marketing research be separated from its philosophical soundness?

We cannot begin to answer those questions now. They remain, for us, the subject of a different strand of research. However, we believe that, whether systematic or not, a realist approach to marketing research and practice ought to take the concepts of perception, object, independence, emergence, identity, affordance, unamendability, and invitation very seriously; we believe that such an approach ought to look very carefully into the intricacies of subjective and objectual aspects of value generation, communication, and appreciation; that it ought to take very seriously the texture of human perception and its relation to the environment on the one hand, and to personal experience on the other but also its stubbornness with respect to radical linguistic or cultural domestication. We also feel that the notions of affordances and invitation ought to be taken into account by any realist interpretation of creativity and innovation. Again, we believe that the fundamental trait of a realist approach to marketing would be the appreciation of reality as something generous, fecund, and unpredictable rather than inert, barren, or residual.

We would like to conclude by raising a question about the potential of a realist approach to other fields of management theory and practice. About that possibility, we confess that we do not have sincere reservations, as we believe our readers will have intuited the relevance of realist philosophy to issues ranging beyond the limits of marketing theory and practice and pertaining to organisation theory, corporate governance, corporate

law, patenting, accounting, administration, finance, and human resources. We have already begun to show how counter-intuitive antirealism is, if observed closely, especially, although not exclusively, when it comes to grasping the status of social entities: intellectual property, patents, brands, resources, professional roles, regulations and balance sheets are part of the real environment in which real firms emerge and operate; and, conversely, professionals and businesses rely upon the reality of such social entities in all sorts of transactions and interactions.

The field is still largely unexplored and the perspectives of a realist approach to management at large are open, especially if we bear in mind that reality is not some inert residue at the bottom of a phantasmagoria of languages and interpretations, but it is what we are always talking about, experiencing, fantasising, struggling with, valuing: what goes on around us, between us, in us, and even without us; perhaps what inspires us to go always a little further.

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