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Idealism, New-Realism and Pragmatism

The American Debate on Reality from Royce to Lewis

0. Introduction

A well-known reaction led by George E. Moore and Bertrand Russell against idealism, in particular that of Francis H. Bradley, dominated British philosophy at the beginning of the twentieth century. *The Refutation of Idealism* (1903)¹ by Moore is rightly considered the manifesto of a new realist trend in the English speaking world.

It is less well-known that new realistic tendencies arose in the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century as a reaction to the idealism dominating American academia.

Although the story was parallel to the British one, American realistic philosophies had their own characteristics and developments: American new realism, for instance, as did American idealism, conversed with pragmatism and interest in the new development of mathematical knowledge grew.

The foremost idealist at that time was Josiah Royce, and the first realistic tendency against his idealism was directed by Ralph B. Perry and William P. Montague. They signed a manifesto with Edwin B. Holt, Walter B. Pitkin, Edward G. Spaulding and Walter T. Marvin, published in 1910 as *The Program and First Platform of Six Realists*. The paper inaugurated the American new realism. Harvard trained three of the six signatories: Holt, Perry and Montague.

The very beginning of the debate was the refutation of realism Royce offered in his monumental work *The World and the Individual* (1900) where he examined and compared the four historical conceptions of being (which he considered to be realism, mysticism, critical rationalism and idealism). Perry and Montague immediately reacted against Royce's arguments with two polemical articles. Their main target was the notion of "reality" Royce used in his reconstruction of

¹ G.E. MOORE, *The Refutation of Idealism*, in *Mind*, n.s., vol. XII, 48 (1903), pp. 433-453.

realism. They tried to tell a different story about realism launching a project to reform philosophy. In 1912 the six published a collective volume entitled *The New Realism: Cooperative Studies in Philosophies*.

Although new realism failed soon afterward – the group broke up after the publication of the volume – it paved the way for other realistic conceptions: first of all, the critical realism of Roy W. Sellars, George Santayana and Arthur Lovejoy. Furthermore, through the mediation operated by Clarence I. Lewis – a mediation between Royce’s idealism and new realism – the new realism extended its influence.

Lewis studied with Royce and Perry, both his teachers at Harvard, and became one of the leading American philosophers of the next generation. His first work *The Place of Intuition in Knowledge* (1910), discussing a Kantian issue – the function of intuition in knowledge – sought to mediate between Royce’s absolute idealism and Perry’s realism.

Analysis of the debate that led to the birth of the new realism will provide a different perspective on the history of American philosophy and will open new reflections on the impact of the debate.

In this debate, “reality” was faced as an epistemological issue rather than an ontological one: the origin of the trend was an ambiguity in Royce’s work. This trend was definitely established by Lewis, who considered reality as the problem of the categories we use to speak correctly about our experience of the world.

The central concern of new realists was to re-define the cognitive relationship, the relationship between knower and known, on a different basis than those of the idealists. Although initially they moved on the ground prepared by Royce, they then attempted to release the notion of reality from epistemology and to return it to metaphysics, claiming the priority of logic on both fields. However, Lewis’ mediation between idealism and new realism established the rule that would be followed by the next generation of philosophers. Reality is relative to the knower, it is a way to describe the world. New realism – influenced by William James’ writings on the notion of “pure experience” – would frame the naturalistic background on which the relation between consciousness and reality would be treated thereafter. The metaphysics they spoke about was a naturalistic metaphysics, in which consciousness and reality were understood as two entities made out of the same physical substrate.

1. Constructive idealism

When Royce published *The World and the Individual. The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* – the work based on the Gifford Lectures delivered before the University of Aberdeen in 1899, at the origin of the American new-realist’s re-

action against idealism – he was already the leading exponent of American idealism and one of the most prestigious thinkers in the country.

He had arrived at Harvard in 1882 and remained there for the rest of his career. Upon his arrival in Cambridge, Royce devoted himself to feverish research activity, which in 1883 resulted in a series of lectures entitled *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, published with the same title in 1885, which would constitute the first and perhaps the most famous of his works. In the first pages of the book, Royce declared that it belonged to the “wide realm of post-Kantian Idealism”², a topic he could study in Germany, where he spent few years after completing his university studies.

The core issue of that work was the relationship between our ideas and the ultimate nature of things. In the *Possibility of Error* chapter, Royce demonstrated that the very conditions which make error possible concerning objective truth can be expressed only by an idealistic theory of the Absolute. The whole philosophy of Royce started with problems arising from Kantian criticism, to which he answered in a Hegelian way.

The argument Royce expressed raised a passionate dispute with his colleague and friend William James. The dispute, known as “The Battle of the Absolute”, determined a reciprocal influence between the two philosophers³.

Royce’s philosophical story was closely linked to another great American thinker, Charles Sanders Peirce: Royce shared with him not only a beginning under the philosophy of Kant but also some of the philosophical solutions at which he arrived⁴. He also shared with Peirce, and with other authors of his generation, a formidable interest in the thought of George Berkeley⁵. All these elements combined to make Royce one of the most original thinkers of his era.

² J. ROYCE, *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy. A Critique of the Bases of Conduct and of Faith*, Houghton Mifflin, Boston 1885, p. IX.

³ Cf. B. KUKLICK, *History of Philosophy in America 1720-2000*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2001, pp. 150-178; cf. also R.B. PERRY, *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. II, Little, Brown and Co., Boston 1935.

⁴ The philosophies of Royce and Peirce were similar in many respects because the first owed a great debt to the latter. The Peircian influence on Royce was particularly evident towards the end of his thought, as he exposed his philosophy of community. Cf. K.A. PARKER, *Josiah Royce: Idealism, Transcendentalism, Pragmatism*, in C. MISAK (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of American Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, New York 2008, pp. 110-124, in part. pp. 117-121.

⁵ The philosophy of Berkeley interested many American thinkers of Royce’s generation and beyond. It was notably the English philosopher’s notion of “idea” that attracted them. Ideas, for Berkeley, owed their generality to the fact that an idea is a sign of another idea; ideas would be unconceivable if separated from the concrete particulars they referred to. Thus the relationships between ideas can reasonably occur between ideas of concrete particulars, every idea being a sign of the other, and not between abstract ideas which were all independent from the individuals. Precisely, the idea, conceived as a “sign”, would be of great importance in the thought of Lewis and then of Nelson Goodman, who would find in it a form of nominalism congenial to him.

The World and the Individual marked a turning point in the philosophical debate of the time: it represented at the same time the apogee of Roycean idealism – the main achievements of his reflection until then were there deepened and systematically exposed – and the beginning of its decline.

The work was very ambitious. Royce intended to examine the four historical conceptions of Being – which he considered to be realism, mysticism, critical rationalism and idealism – and to offer a version of its idealistic perspective. The ultimate aim of the work was to show how his version of idealism could solve the fundamental problems of morality and religion. Royce carried out the task Lord Gifford assigned to his lecturers: to deal with the fundamental problems of religion – namely with questions concerning the nature of the self and the meaning of the world – upon which the burst of evolutionary theory had attempted to impose a redefinition⁶. Royce had always aimed to provide a secure philosophical foundation for morality and religion: the question about the destiny of man lay at the core of his research. He felt that question was his own, and was one closely linked to philosophical research, which must meet the cultural needs of the time.

In the first pages of the work, Royce declared that religion would be primarily regarded as a branch of the theory of Being: to deal with the fundamental problems of religion it is first necessary to refer to the ultimate problems of the Theory of Being. Philosophy had to provide a foundation for religion and morality, and then the results of such ontological studies would be applied to religion.

What is, then, the fundamental problem of the Theory of Being? “The central problem of our discussion will be the question: What is Reality?”⁷.

The question is immediately declined by Royce in one specific direction. The inquiry seems promising if we put the question in these terms: “What is an Idea?” and “How can Ideas stand in any true relation to Reality?”. He chose to treat “the problem of Reality from the side of the means through which we are supposed to be able to attain reality, that is, from the side of the Ideas”⁸.

It is with this option that the American philosopher marked the context of the subsequent philosophical discussion, including, at least initially, both his antagonists, namely the new-realists and those who, like Lewis, though recognising the reasons of the new-realists, would overcome the idealism of the master from a pragmatic perspective. This was an option that John Dewey, in his review of Royce’s work, seemed to greet positively, since he said that Royce’s

⁶ To the interpretation of the evolutionary theory Royce dedicated a part of the second series of lectures from *The World and the Individual*.

⁷ J. ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being*, The Macmillan Company, New York 1900, p. 6.

⁸ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 19.

attempt to centre the discussion about the nature of ideas allowed him to set new issues⁹.

The definition of the idea afforded by Royce in these pages is of great importance to comprehend the method he would apply to his whole survey of the four historical conceptions of being.

According to a trend well known in philosophy – a trend Royce wanted to reject – ideas are defined as images of external facts. From this standpoint, the representative power of ideas – namely the fact of the reference to an external object – is their essential and primitive character. Royce thought that this characteristic of the idea needed to be criticised and stated on a new basis, so as not to assume what we want to examine, that is the possibility of a knowledge of Being.

But this definition ignores the active aspect of our mental life. Intellectual ideas never consist of simple images but always involve a consciousness of how we propose to act towards the things of which ideas are. It is what Royce meant by saying that “your idea of the object involves the memory of the appropriate act”¹⁰.

When he defined ideas as “plans of action”, namely as ways of constructing the objects of scientific consciousness, G.F. Stout provided an appropriate definition for the idea in itself. The primitive and essential character of the idea was to be the expression of a purpose.

“By the word Idea [...] I shall mean in the end any state of consciousness, whether simple or complex, which, when present, is then and there viewed as at least the partial expression or embodiment of a single conscious purpose. [...] [A]n idea appears in consciousness as having the significance of an act of will”¹¹.

An idea in itself is the result of an intellectual process as well as an expression of the will. It is the emphasis on the will that makes clear the essential meaning of the idea. Idea is the struggle of the will seeking its object. Royce’s favourite example was that of a melody sung in the head. Singing or listening to a melody in the mind is a musical idea which partially or fully embodies a purpose, namely that of imagining a melody.

For Royce, emphasising the active role of the mind in the definition of the idea meant to follow the path traced by Kant. That is what Kant meant in his *Critique of the Pure Reason* when he talked about the spontaneity of intellect.

⁹ Cf. J. DEWEY, *Review to The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being*, in *Philosophical Review*, vol. 9, 3 (1900), pp. 311-324.

¹⁰ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 22.

¹¹ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., pp. 22-23.

However Royce followed a Kantian direction as well as a pragmatic one. We find more than an assonance with James: he also recognised the original status of ideas in their disposition to act, and he pointed out that the selective role of the mind involves sensations.

Ideas are true or false by virtue of their correspondence to an outer object that the idea has first chosen as its own. External and independent reality cannot determine the success, or the failure, of an idea independently of what purpose the idea has on its own.

“[...] And apart from such conscious selection, apart from such ideal predetermination of the object on the part of the idea, apart from such free voluntary submission of the idea to its self-imposed task, the object itself, the fact world, in its independence, can do nothing either to confirm or refute the idea”¹².

The natural tendency of the idea to fulfill its volition is more important than its tendency to know.

This conception was also expressed by Royce by means of the distinction between the internal and the external meaning of the idea. The internal meaning of the idea is its purpose, the external meaning is its reference to an external object. So the initial problem stated by Royce – the problem of the relationship between Idea and Being – received another formulation: how is it that the internal meaning of the idea can correspond to the external meaning of the same idea?

Common sense, as well as special sciences, count the reference of ideas to fact – the external meaning – as the most important function of ideas: the correspondence between ideas and facts is the only condition required to ascertain the truth of the idea. Suppose we have to count some apples in a basket: it is clear that they are independent and indifferent to my counting; it is clear that my activity of counting depends on the presence of those apples in a precise number; it is clear that that number does not depend on my counting the apples. My ideas are judged true or false by virtue of their corresponding to, or being in contradiction with, some external facts that function as a constraint upon them.

However in this case, Royce maintained, the question of the correspondence between the two terms cannot even be posed unless the idea has an internal meaning, that is a purpose in relation to the object.

“We shall, perhaps to our surprise, reach the seemingly paradoxical and essentially idealistic thesis that no being in heaven or in earth, or in the waters under the earth, has power to give to an idea any purpose unless, the idea itself, as idea, as a fragment

¹² ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., pp. 31-32.

of life, as a conscious thrill, so to speak, of inner meaning, first somehow truly learns so to develop its internal meaning as to assign to itself just that specific purpose”¹³.

If the idea did not select and pre-determine, the object, any verification would be possible. If the external meaning of the idea is not in continuity with the internal meaning of it, if it is not involved in it, the idea cannot have an external meaning at all.

This consideration “is essentially the same as the consideration that led Kant to regard the understanding as the creator of the phenomenal nature over which science gradually wins conscious control, and that led Hegel to call the world the embodied Idea”¹⁴.

In Royce’s project, the same consideration interacted with the conceptions of Being he analysed: he reduced the question about the nature of being to a question about the correspondence between the inner and the – still apparently – outer meaning of ideas.

The distinction is due to the difference between the partial and the total fulfillment of a purpose. Ideas express our purposes only in a vague, fragmentary, abstract, indeterminate way. They are “mere universals”.

“Our theory [...] will assert that the very Absolute, in all its fullness of life, is even now the object that you really mean by your fragmentary passing ideas, and that the defect of your present human form of momentary consciousness lies in the fact that you just now do not know precisely what you mean. [...] The universe you have always with you, as your true internal meaning”¹⁵.

Every idea seeks its objects – in Royce’s words the idea seeks “its other” – to fulfill the purpose it only partially possesses.

The Absolute became the place of all the meanings, “the highest fulfillment of the very category of Individuality, the Individual of Individuals”¹⁶. Individuality was for Royce the entirely fulfilled and totally determined meaning of the idea.

Following this direction, the American philosopher gave a first answer to the question with which he began his endeavour: what is reality?

“we finite beings live in the search for individuality, of life, of will, of experience, in brief, of meaning. The whole meaning, which is the world, the Reality, will prove to be,

¹³ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 33.

¹⁴ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 32.

¹⁵ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 39

¹⁶ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 40.

for this very reason, not a barren Absolute, which devours individuals, not a wilderness [...] a place where there is no definite life, nor yet a whole that absorbs definition, but a whole that is just to the finite aspect of every flying moment, and of every transient or permanent form of finite selfhood, a whole that is an individual system of rationally linked and determinate, but for that very reason not externally determined, ethically free individuals, who are nevertheless One in God. It is just because all meanings, in the end, will prove to be internal meanings, that this which the internal meaning most loves, namely the presence of concrete fulfillment, of life, of pulsating and originative will, of freedom, and of individuality, will prove, for our view, to be of the very essence of the Absolute Meaning of the world”¹⁷.

The only purpose of the distinction between the internal and external meaning of ideas was to see at the end the real and ultimate unity of the two.

In a later passage, as he was about to discuss the first historical conception of being, namely realism, Royce used the most elementary expressions of the classic ontological vocabulary: he warned that the distinction between the internal and the external meaning of the idea corresponded to the difference between the *what* – the essence, the ideal nature – and the *that* – the existence or reality – of an object, and that this difference had not to be considered as definitive. He then affirms:

“In these lectures I shall always mean by Being the Real Being of things, the *that*. Nor shall I try to make any systematic difference in usage between Reality and Existence, or the adjectives real and existent. [...] But by and by we shall indeed learn that this whole sundering of the *what* and the *that* is a false abstraction, a mere necessary stage on the way to insight”¹⁸.

The four historical conceptions of being will be treated as four different ways of interpreting the nature of the relationship between the internal and the external meaning of ideas.

Royce would return to his idealism, which he would define in this work as “constructive idealism” when he discussed the fourth historical conception of being. In the lecture we just examined, the first, he clarified his entire task and – what is most interesting for our purpose – he outlined the framework for the philosophical debate after him.

¹⁷ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 42.

¹⁸ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 54.

2. Royce's critical examination of realism

The distinction between internal and external meaning of the idea became, in Royce's words, the perennial conflict between the ideal and the immediate aspect of life, the dramatic war between the simple idea and the simple experience. This conflict is what makes us aware of our finitude: "We all endlessly war against the essential narrowness of our conscious field. We live looking for the whole of our meaning. And this looking constitutes the process called thinking"¹⁹.

Ultimately the conflict is the effort of the thought – meant as the totality of ideas – to comprehend the being.

"Being, in this warfare, that which is real, as opposed and contrasted to that which just now is merely suggested to us by our momentary ideas as they fly, and which is not yet confirmed by facts, Being, I say, always appears in the conflict and in the incompleteness of our human thinking, as that which we first regard as real in advance of more special definition, in so far as we call it Other than our merely transient and finite thinking of the moment"²⁰.

We seek the Being as what enables the thought to fulfill its ideal purpose; it is what would quiet the war between thought and facts.

Fact and Idea, Immediacy and Thought are elements of a necessary war. The conception of the being we may form depends on the meaning we ascribe to the relationship between those opposite factors. The four historical conceptions of being, of what is real, are discussed by Royce as four different manners to interpret that relationship.

The first conception he examined and refuted was the realistic one: the refutation of realism by Royce would provoke the reaction of some philosophers ready to declare themselves realist if realism was not the conception defined and refuted by Royce.

Royce criticised realism with the intent of demonstrating the essential relationship between ideas and being. Realism viewed from this perspective is most contrary to his own doctrine. Indeed, the realist perspective, more than any other historical conception of being, tends to keep separate essence and existence, the *what* from the *that*.

What is the realistic definition of reality?

"[...] to be real means to be independent of an idea or experience through which the

¹⁹ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 56.

²⁰ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 59.

real being is, from without, felt, or thought, or known [...]. [R]ecognizing independent beings as real, lays explicit stress upon their independence as the very essence of their reality”²¹.

To comprehend this definition, we may state the difference between real and unreal objects in this way: unreal, or fictitious, objects are totally dependent on the ideas that conceive them (they may be dreams, fancies, visions, etc.); real objects are totally independent of such ideas. Furthermore, realism is not necessarily materialistic, though materialists are necessarily realists. In the history of thought we find many varieties of realism.

However, in his discussion Royce kept separate the ontological perspective from the historical evolution of the problem, that is he reduced “the central question of every realistic view of the universe to its lowest terms”²². In the task of criticising historical realism he would follow a logical and argumentative path.

What are the “minimal terms” of any realistic system we have ever had? “[...] the one essential historical mark of the realistic type of Being” is “its ontological independence of knowledge that refers to it from without”²³. “Any real being, as you see, has to be essentially, and if possible absolutely, independent”²⁴. Independence is the key concept of realism, and the pivotal point for Royce’s refutation.

Royce considered the logical implications of the independence assumed by realists and followed them to extreme consequences. In particular, our author drew three implications from the assumption that “to be real” is “to be independent”.

1. The first implication is about relationships: if the being is so defined, all relationships, for example the causal relationship, must be external to the terms of the relationship itself.

2. For the independence of the realist to be an absolute independence, the second implication of this assumption is that the real object remains absolutely independent from all the ideas that may ever refer to it.

3. That independence is a mutual independence – this is the third implication – so that one term of the relationship, either the idea or the object, could disappear without causing the slightest difference to the other.

These three implications clarify the meaning of the assumed independence

²¹ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 64.

²² ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 90.

²³ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 106.

²⁴ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 103.

upon which the realist grounds his ontology. On the basis of these implications, Royce applied the realistic definition of reality to the classic problem of the One and the Many, proving in which contradictions it falls, and how far from common sense – the tradition ally of realism – it goes.

Historically, realism wavered between two extremes, questioning whether the real world contained one independent being or many independent beings from any knowledge we could have about it.

The second alternative is the first examined by Royce: he entered the realistic world composed of many independent, different and real beings. He set forth two arguments, both of which would lead him to identify realism with some form of nominalism.

In the first place, if we assume the existence of many independent real beings, we cannot admit real relationships between them: “The mutual independence, if once real, and real as defined, cannot later be changed to any form of mutual dependence”²⁵.

A causal link supervening upon two facts considered as independent beings, will be a completely new fact that the definition of any of the two facts so related does not comprehend. The new real being, namely the causal link, is another being, different from the two facts as much as the two facts were different one from another. This link must be a logically independent fact from the two original facts. So, it is only a nominal and not an actual link.

For Royce, beings are related before an actual relationship occurs between them: they are related by space and time and by physical and moral links. What we can apprehend from experience is that a certain relationship between two objects can stay unobserved for a long time: it does not prove how beings would behave if they were reciprocally independent, as the definition of the realist states.

In the second place, real beings cannot have common characters. We can only assert the existence of those characters nominally.

In ordinary experience we usually observe objects that have common characters. Assume we have two cherries that we judge to be red: according to the realist, they are two independent beings, having a quality in common.

Suppose that one of the two is destroyed. From the realist’s point of view, no change necessarily occurs to the other cherry. The quality supposed to be the same in both beings remains unaltered in the being still present. But if the realist cannot accept this consequence, then he will be forced to admit that the quality shared by the two beings was partly the same.

However, Royce believed such a solution may be refuted:

²⁵ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., p. 129.

“If something is only partly the same in your two independent beings, then some part of the part, some aspect of the aspect, must be really and ultimately quite the same. Name me any feature whatever in one of these two beings, any character sensuous or supersensuous of which you will say: It is a common feature, really the same in these two beings. Then in my turn I will show you that just that feature is not the same, for I will suppose one of the two objects destroyed, as by hypothesis I have a right to do. I will then find the other in all its features quite unchanged, as by hypothesis I can do. And so I will show that what was destroyed in the one object cannot be the same as what survives unchanged in the other [...]”²⁶.

It follows that the many entities of the realistic world do not have any character in common. They seem to have a link but this is just a name. This sameness is not real. There are no real ties whatsoever except nominal ones.

So deprived of the possibility to admit a multiplicity of real beings independent and related, the realist is forced to turn to the other hypothesis: they can assume that the world is a single, real, one Being, though internally complex. The various aspects and functions of the one Being are not logically independent but are related in a system so that to define a part of it is to define something of the essence of the all. Consequently, any part could change, alter, or be destroyed without some change, however minimal, in the other parts of the whole.

But this way is closed from the beginning for the realist, Royce warned, for in the realistic world there are at least two beings absolutely independent one from another, namely the idea and the object. That reality means independence, and that ideas are existent entities, or parts of an existent and independent entity, is the most forgotten thesis of all realistic systems. An idea possesses the real being.

No idea can refer to an independent reality: for, if this reference is real, two separate beings would bridge the gap whose existence is determined by their very essence.

3. The New Realism

Two years after the publication of *The World and the Individual*, two of Royce’s former students rebelled against the arguments their master used, pretending to refute realism. They wrote two articles: Montague’s *Professor Royce’s Refutation of Realism* (1902) appeared in the *Philosophical Review*, and Perry’s, *Prof. Royce’s Refutation of Realism and Pluralism* (1901-2), in the *The Monist*.

²⁶ ROYCE, *The World and the Individual: The Four Historical Conceptions of Being* cit., pp. 130-131.

After this first reaction against Royce, other four philosophers joined Perry and Montague: Edwin B. Holt, one of the most brilliant of Royce's students also at Harvard, and Walter T. Marvin, Walter B. Pitkin and Edward G. Spaulding. In 1910 the six men – who professor Royce ironically called “the six little realists”, published in the *Journal of Philosophy* a brief programmatic article entitled *The Program and First Platform of Six Realists*²⁷. They expressed the thesis that they then developed in the collective volume *The New Realism: Cooperative Studies in Philosophy*²⁸, with which the six carried out a revolt or, in Perry's words, an “assault upon the citadel of philosophical orthodoxy”²⁹.

Perry's and Montague's articles were the first impulse of the assault: they both saw the way chosen by Royce in his description of the realist's conception of reality. Montague observed that Royce decided to classify the principal ontological conceptions considering their attitude towards a single epistemological question, namely the relationship of an idea and its object. Perry more radically said that Royce treated ultimate problems epistemologically: he grounded the critique of the historical ontological conceptions, as well as his constructive idealism, on the analysis of “the ways in which reality presents itself as an object of thought”. “Although he announces as his central problem, “What is Reality?” [...], it soon becomes evident that he is not seeking to discover what is real, so much as what it is to be real. [...] The object of study is the intension rather than the extension of that term”³⁰. According to Perry this is a fruitless method. Philosophy is essentially driven by the desire to know more deeply a world that is partially manifest to us. We would not search for reality if we had not already found it. It is contrary to a genuine philosophical spirit to turn from the study of real things to the study of the adjective real, as Royce did. To know reality, the philosopher has to study more real things.

The existential predicate cannot be defined: it is assumed by philosophical

²⁷ E.B. HOLT / W.T. MARVIN / W.P. MONTAGUE / R.B. PERRY / W.B. PITKIN / E.G. SPAULDING, *Program and First Platform of Six Realists*, in *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, 7 (1910), pp. 373-401.

²⁸ Cf. E.B. HOLT / W.T. MARVIN / W.P. MONTAGUE / R.B. PERRY / W.B. PITKIN / E.G. SPAULDING, *The New Realism: Cooperative Studies in Philosophy*, The Macmillan Company, New York 1912.

²⁹ Cf. R.B. PERRY, *William Pepperell Montague and the New Realists*, in *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 51, 21 (1954), pp. 604-608, in part. p. 604. As Montague noted in a retrospective study on American realism, at the end of the nineteenth century there was almost no interest in realistic views. Moreover realistic theories were fragmentary as idealism conquered the philosophical scene. D.T. Harris, the United States Commissioner of Education, organised in St. Louis a group for the study of Hegelism and founded the *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*. Henceforth, idealism, variously declined, knew a large diffusion and became the dominant trend in academia, in the east as on the west coast. Cf. W.P. MONTAGUE, *The Story of American realism*, in *Philosophy*, vol. 12, 46 (1937), pp. 140-161.

³⁰ R.B. PERRY, *Prof. Royce's Refutation of Realism and Pluralism*, in *The Monist*, 12 (1901-2), pp. 446-458, in part. p. 447.

reflection and also by conscious life. In other words, it is assumed by the preliminary experience of each person. From this assumption, the purpose of the philosopher is to know other real things, to find similarities in them in order to expand the experience. So according to Perry the question is not “What is reality?” but “what is all reality like?”.

Interpreting Royce’s question epistemologically rather than metaphysically, Perry criticised the epistemological model afforded by Royce. He opted for a naturalised epistemology that did not ask “what is real” but directed itself towards a factual knowledge of reality.

Philosophical theories, as those examined by Royce, should be classified by means of the way they answer that question. The four historical conceptions of being may hold for different hypothesis about the composition of reality; a reality that is accepted as an aspect of the preliminary experience of each person. This aspect is an inescapable core of our experience, something given and so rich as to allow many different ways of intending it.

Royce abstracted the problem of the relationship between consciousness and reality and limited himself to a definition of the historical conceptions based on the ways each of them treated the question. But in the case of realism, independence is inherent in a being that is already given. Independence does not constitute the existential predicate but is part of a whole existence with which it shares that predicate.

Furthermore, the philosopher cannot, as Royce did, substitute the very philosophical activity with a psychological description of it. “My intellect desires the real”, then “the real is the object of my desire”, is Royce’s way of reasoning; but the reality my intellect desires and the reality defined by means of that desiring cannot be the same.

We look for something we have already found, something given, otherwise it could not be an object for our intellect. Contra Royce, it has been said that it is not possible to define the being, which remains an irrational term. Realism is based on this impossibility to define the being and shares this conviction with common sense. Perry insisted upon the close relationship between realism and common sense. Here his definition of realism:

“The realist believes reality to be a *datum*, a *somewhat that is given independently of whatever ideas may be formed about it*. According to the realist, the real has a *locus*, a *habitat*, whether or no within some individual experience. Here the real primarily *is*, and *is*, regardless of whatever secondary meanings, symbols, names, relations, or ideas of any kind may be referred to it”³¹.

³¹ PERRY, *Professor Royce’s Refutation of Realism* cit., p. 451.

Perry maintained that reality is independent from thought but that thought can only reveal and not construct or constitute his object.

The knowing process is not a creative one so that it can condition the nature of known things: the argument that supports such a conviction is the *argument from egocentric predicament*³² set forth by Perry in his article of 1910. The argument proved only a difficulty, namely that of determining modifications of things through the knowing, for the simple fact that we cannot have a situation in which knowing is not present without destroying the conditions of observation. But to infer that objects depend on knowledge from the fact that all objects are known, would be like defending a tautology which states that known objects are known objects. The omnipresence of the cognitive relationship is not in any way relevant to the concept of reality.

It is worth noting that Perry's target – and then the new realists' as well – to which he gave the name of “idealism” is actually an epistemological subjectivism. Furthermore, the question new realists posed against idealism, namely the question of whether cognitive relationships are a necessary condition for the reality of known objects, is treated without referring to the ultimate nature of the knower or of the object known.

Isolating problems and analysing them separately is one of the programmatic points of new realism, but in this case, as Montague will note in a later article³³, this was due to the differences over metaphysics among the members of the group. Those differences were the principal reason the group of six realists broke up. Montague declared himself as having a less naturalistic metaphysics than that of his colleagues, and he did not want to renounce it. So it was very important to ascertain that the realist theory of knowledge on which the six converged did not involve metaphysical commitments.

In his paper on *The World and the Individual*, Montague, like Perry, engaged a discussion of the meaning independence had for a realist. According to Montague's line of argument, Royce confused the *ratio cognoscendi* with the *ratio essendi* and then he failed to consider the notion of independence: it is not what makes an object real but what makes us aware that it is real. That an object remains independent of all the variations of the idea we may have of it, is not an effect of its being real but the very cause of its reality. Independence is just a sign through which we recognise the separation between the object and the idea,

³² The expression “egocentric predicament” was coined by Perry to indicate the impossibility of a direct contact with reality since our knowledge of the world must take the form of our representations. This impossibility makes room for doubts about the very existence of reality. Cf. R.B. PERRY, *The Ego-centric Predicament*, in *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, and Scientific Methods*, 7 (1910), pp. 5-14.

³³ MONTAGUE, *The Story of American realism* cit., p. 150.

it is not the grounds of that separation; independence is what makes us conclude the numerical separateness of the idea and the object. In other words, it is the inevitable implication of the numerical non-identity of the object and its idea³⁴.

Both Montague and Perry stressed that when Royce defined realism as the conception that affirms the absolute and mutual independence of the object and the idea, he had in mind only a “representational” realism. This is the form of realism traditionally ascribed to Locke and Descartes, and that was attacked by the six realists. According to representational realism, ideas mediate our experience of the external world: we immediately know sense data through which we infer external objects as the cause of our perceptions. On these grounds Royce could easily conclude the impossibility for the realist to compose the fracture between the subject and the object. Royce did not consider a “presentational” realism, a form of realism closer to common sense, according to which the object of perception is the external object, directly apprehended without any mediation.

The issues raised by Perry and Montague gave inspiration to the cooperative philosophical project called *new realism* that involved other four scholars: the official starting point of it was the publication of a manifesto entitled *The Program and First Platform of Six Realists*. The *platform* is constituted of six different lists, one for each member of the group, containing the fundamental assumptions of this new version of realism. There are six different lists but a common philosophical doctrine.

New realism showed up as a doctrine concerning the relationship between the knowing process and the object known, and its pivotal idea was that the nature of reality cannot be inferred by the nature of consciousness.

It arose in opposition to idealism, which was accused of epistemological subjectivism and, at least at the beginning, its fortune was the greatness of its enemy. Even though the opposition to idealism remained the driving force of new realism, the manifesto contained elements for a positive and original doctrine.

The points upon which the six easily agreed were methodological in nature. According to these, the sciences should constitute a model for philosophy. Philosophy lacked the rigor sciences exhibited in its inaccuracy in the use of words and for the isolation in which philosophers conducted their work. Cooperation, as the one the six stated, was the only way to reveal the long-time problems of the method philosophy had used until then.

In 1912 the six published a volume of five hundred pages: on the basis of the programmatic declaration of the *platform*, the volume represented the endeavor

³⁴ W.P. MONTAGUE, *Professor Royce's Refutation of Realism*, in *Philosophical Review*, 11 (1902), pp. 43-55.

our to build their philosophical theories. Furthermore, they clearly aimed to act as the third pole of the philosophical debate between Royce and pragmatism.

One of the most interesting aspects of the new realistic view that emerged in this volume, in particular in the essay by Marvin, is the idea of an emancipation of metaphysics from epistemology³⁵. In this essay the author developed the first statement of his list, in which he had said that “Epistemology is not logically fundamental”³⁶. He thought that the nature of things should not be sought in the nature of knowledge.

New realism not only proposed a different theory of knowledge but “a different doctrine as to the place of epistemology in the hierarchy of the sciences”³⁷. It was of the most importance for metaphysics. Marvin’s point was that epistemology does not provide a theory of reality but presupposes it. He criticised the Kantian view of an a priori science as a required prerequisite for metaphysics, and opposed the idea that we can determine a priori the nature, the possibility and the limits of knowledge: epistemology must assume valid knowledge as a necessary condition for it to work. Valid knowledge is what we borrow from the sciences: from logic, psychology, etc. It may be objected that what is in question here, what Kant actually questioned, was the validity of possible knowledge. However, this objection is inconsistent with the idea of epistemology as an a priori science, that is a science more fundamental than metaphysics and psychology: valid knowledge can be determined only on the basis of data derived from logic, psychology and metaphysics. Kant himself, Marvin observed, assumed a certain system of psychology of the faculties and a certain conception of reality for his deduction of the categories, that is to say that Kantian metaphysics preceded epistemology.

In general, the history of science and the history of metaphysics do not record any important changes or significant advances due to epistemology. Indeed, when epistemology has invaded the field of those two disciplines, it has created more problems than benefits. Sciences and metaphysics should free themselves from epistemology and should develop their field independently from it.

Once we leave critical epistemology, the field is open for a constructive metaphysics. New realists considered modern physics a valid method for knowing and describing the constitution of reality.

Another important aspect to understanding the new realist view is their ten-

³⁵ W.T. MARVIN, *The Emancipation of Metaphysics from Epistemology*, in HOLT / MARVIN / MONTAGUE / PERRY / PITKIN / SPAULDING, *The New Realism: Cooperative Studies in Philosophy* cit., pp. 45-95.

³⁶ HOLT / MARVIN / MONTAGUE / PERRY / PITKIN / SPAULDING, *Program and First Platform of Six Realists* cit., p. 394.

³⁷ MARVIN, *The Emancipation of Metaphysics from Epistemology* cit., p. 51.

dency towards pluralistic metaphysics. The reason for such a preference is explained negatively, that is arguing against a monistic metaphysics. Historically, monism in metaphysics – namely the idea that there is ultimately only one thing or one kind of things – has been based on two alternative grounds. The first is the internality of relationships, that is the assumption that relationships are internal to things, contained in the nature of them. It is the conviction of absolute idealists like Royce, when they say that things can only be known in relation to an Absolute Mind (or to Spirit, God, etc.). From this premise, from the assumption that all things are so interrelated because all are relative to an Absolute entity, it is easy to conclude that the nature of each thing contains the nature of all. Realism rejects this premise, simply sustaining that “it is contrary to the facts of existence, and to the facts of logic”³⁸. The second is the universality of cognition, also characteristic of idealism. The rejection of this point marked the very beginning of the new realism.

For new realists relationships are external to their terms, they do not modify or unify the terms that have an independent reality from the relationships in which they enter.

Denying that knowledge is the condition of reality, new realists came to conceive the knower as an element among others within physic nature. The difference between knower and object known is just a difference between any two bodies of which we observe the mutual relationship.

This conception was enormously influenced by William James: between 1904 and 1905 he wrote several articles for the *Journal of Philosophy* in which he exposed the idea of “pure experience”³⁹. According to James, experience is made of one stuff that constitutes all things: bodies and minds as well are made of the same tissue. Pure experience is neither mental nor physical (although it is defined experience). This means that there is no ontological difference between the consciousness and the material object: they are just different ways of organisation of pure experience. Certainly James’ intuition gave to new realists a new way of thinking about knowledge relationships, once the independence of the object was assumed.

The idea of independence of the object known is tied to the conviction that knowledge content is identical to the object known. If the new realist was pluralist in metaphysics, they were monist in epistemology: when things are known they are identical to ideas or the contents of that knowledge. Consciousness does

³⁸ HOLT / MARVIN / MONTAGUE / PERRY / PITKIN / SPAULDING, *The New Realism: Cooperative Studies in Philosophy* cit., p. 33.

³⁹ W. JAMES, *Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?; A World of Pure Experience; How Two Minds Can Know the Same Thing; Is Radical Empiricism Solipsistic?; The Place of Affectional Facts in a World of Pure Experience*, all appeared in *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*.

not condition the known thing, but when a thing is known it is identical to the knowledge we have of it.

For the new realist, knowledge takes place in an environment independent from it. When this environment is known it enters into a direct relationship with the knower. The knower is homogeneous to the environment, continuous to it and can be known in the same way the other things in the world are known.

The new realist is also a platonic realist. The objects of thought, like the object of sense, have a proper ontological status as well as being the object of logic and of physics. The influence of Russell on this point is clear: ideal entities, platonically independent in their existence, can enter into a cognitive relationship with the knower.

In a retrospective account of realism, Montague revealed what in his opinion caused the end of the new realist enterprise, so soon after the publication of the big cooperative volume and despite the fact that they had considered cooperation a fundamental methodological assumption of their philosophical proposal. The most important differences between the six concerned the “behaviouristic” interpretation of consciousness and the ontological status of the objects of illusion and error. Although they basically agreed upon epistemology, in the metaphysical field problems soon arose. Perhaps the two fields – metaphysics and epistemology – could not stay so separate as they believed at the beginning.

In 1920 another group of realists, led by Roy W. Sellars, G. Santayana and A. Lovejoy, published a cooperative study entitled *Essays on Critical Realism*⁴⁰: it started from similar questions to those posed by new realists. They wanted to call themselves “critical realists” to create a distance from the “naïve” realism of their predecessors. However, there was also in this group, as Montague observed, a substantial agreement that epistemology did not correspond to a uniformity in their metaphysical views.

But another thinker, grown up as a philosopher at Harvard, who received the issues of both idealism and realism, Clarence I. Lewis, would be decisive for the destiny of “reality” for the next generation of philosopher.

4. The synthesis of Lewis

Lewis entered the debate between Royce and the new realists by trying a middle way. Despite his declared preference for Royce’s idealism, he was influenced

⁴⁰ D. DRAKE / A.O. LOVEJOY / J.B. PRATT / A.K. ROGERS / G. SANTAYANA / R.W. SELLARS / G.A. STRONG, *Essays in Critical Realism: A Co-Operative Study of the Problem of Knowledge*, Macmillan & Co., London 1920.

by new-realism and Perry in particular⁴¹ – also his teacher at Harvard – on some crucial points. Lewis soon deviated from the realist thesis and followed Royce in an even more Kantian and pragmatic way. However, in his conception of the given – maybe the most characteristic conception of Lewis’ philosophy – some of Perry’s ideas persisted.

Lewis’ doctoral dissertation, *The Place of Intuition in Knowledge*, was an attempt to reconcile the realistic epistemology with the voluntaristic one of his two masters. In this work Lewis declared the impossibility of holding a direct realism.

The real object in fact cannot be the immediate object of knowledge. Lewis’ approach, as Royce’s, was phenomenalist: the knower is not immediately and directly aware of physical objects but of sense data. The data of senses are the basis of knowledge and constitute a possible experience only.

The definition of the real object must take into account the intellectual activity which is the constructive element in knowledge and that constantly interprets the immediate, possible, experience.

The activity of thought needs the data of sense, that Lewis called the intuitive element in knowledge, to function. Intuition provides the material without which thought would be empty. Lewis’ intuitive element is the element Perry talked about.

However, a real object is neither the product of will nor the immediate given. For Lewis, the reality of the object is not different from what we apprehend in the immediate presentation of the object to consciousness, even though none of those presentations can completely define or capture it.

Lewis seemed to incline towards realism when he affirmed that spatio-temporal qualities of real objects are given and that the qualities revealed in our activity are already, though implicitly, in the given. The real object, defined by possible experiences, consists of several given presentations. The role of the mind is just to organise and select.

A few years later, in an article in 1913 entitled *Realism and Subjectivism*⁴², Lewis returned to Royce and attacked Perry and the new realists for the erroneous characterisation they gave of idealism. The story repeated itself, in the opposite direction.

Idealists maintained that real objects depend on knowledge because they are not distinct from known objects: if Perry, who considered idealism a form of scepticism, believed that the real object was separate from the cognitive relationship

⁴¹ C.I. LEWIS, *The Place of Intuition in Knowledge*, Dissertation, Harvard University 1910.

⁴² C.I. LEWIS, *Realism and Subjectivism*, in *Journal of Philosophy*, 10.2 (1913), pp. 43-49; poi in J. GOHEEN / J. MOTHERSHEAD (eds.), *Collected Papers of Clarence Irving Lewis*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1970, pp. 35-41.

distinguishing known object and real object, he fell into the same scepticism. Holding that the real object transcends knowledge, Perry admitted that it would be impossible to know the independent reality. Idealism denied that whole reality can be identical with a subject's finite experience: it affirmed that reality is *knowable* and not that all reality is known.

Then the egocentric predicament should be so understood: all that is or will be, possessed by the knowing mind is or will be a present experience: this experience however cannot satisfy the interests of knowledge. For this reason it is problematic to regard the immediate data of consciousness as something independent. What is important for knowledge is its meaning, and this, and meaning, "always reaches beyond the present experience. The problem of the validity of this meaning is the problem of knowledge, as idealism – since Kant – conceives it"⁴³. The egocentric predicament seems to be the only solution to the problem of the validity of knowledge, a problem that realists, according to Lewis, were not able to solve and that became central in Lewis philosophy as the epistemological problem *par excellence*.

It is difficult for realism to explain how and in what measure an object in a cognitive relationship differs from an object independent of this relationship; how realism explains the identity between the known, and so dependent, object, and that same object as still independent from knowledge. The problem then is to give an account of an identity in a difference, having to do with external relations: how to explain that the table known is still the same table, independent and nonetheless now different, from the fact that it has entered a knowledge relationship.

If we assume, Lewis claimed in proposing his view, that the principles of knowledge have a legislative power for everything that can be defined as "real" and that reality is then dependent on knowledge, we will be sure that the known object and the real object are not substantially different and that knowledge is objectively valid. If we assume the egocentric predicament stressing the independence of reality from knowledge, then the subject will remain irremediably entrapped in the circle of its experience.

Furthermore, on a realist basis it is not possible to explain why the idea I have of the table in front of me should be true, namely why that idea should refer or correspond to the real table: this is the question of the justification of our beliefs about the world. For the realist the objects that grant the truth of ideas are inaccessible, since objects known are different from real objects. The new realists could not account for the causal relationship, even though they used it, and in

⁴³ LEWIS, *Realism and Subjectivism* cit., p. 45.

general for the relationships between real and unknown objects or between real objects and known objects.

In conclusion, according to Lewis, new realism unavoidably turned into scepticism. The same problem could not occur for idealists: for them it was knowledge that established the criteria for reality and thus has the means to establish when it is objectively valid. Idealism proves a somewhat necessary relationship between reality and the way we know it.

We can know reality only in relation to our ends: the failure of realists to account for the validity of knowledge proved that it was necessary to have a teleology. Knowledge is valid only if it constitutes reality, if it gives its laws to the real object. So Lewis sketched his third pragmatic way, a way well founded in Roycean idealism, which would be discussed by him but never rejected at all.

However, at that time Lewis still had not found a satisfying argument to account for the validity of knowledge. His masterpiece of 1929 was devoted to this task. It is entitled *Mind and World Order. An Outline of a Theory of Knowledge* and Lewis arrived at this work after the “illumination” that the study of Peirce’s philosophy gave him.

In the introduction of the work – *About philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular. The proper method of philosophy* – Lewis fixed the assumptions and the method of his investigation: it is a premise of the most importance because he declared in it the proper task of philosophy and of metaphysics, playing on the notion of “reality”.

In perfect consonance with Perry, Lewis claimed that every philosophical enterprise is concerned with the world which is already familiar to us and so with something we already know in a certain way: philosophy’s aim is to clearly and distinctly comprehend the principles implied in our relationship to the familiar world.

If metaphysics is concerned with the nature of reality in general, then it would seem far from the world of everyday experience. Reality in fact always transcends the limits of that experience. To prove its fruitfulness, metaphysics has to remain within the reflective method:

“[...] metaphysics as a philosophic discipline is concerned with the nature of the real only so far as that problem is amenable to the reflective method and does not trench upon the field where only scientific investigation can achieve success”⁴⁴.

Particular sciences deal with the solution of problems concerning phenomena

⁴⁴ C.I. LEWIS, *Mind and the World Order. Outline of a Theory of Knowledge*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York-Chicago-Boston 1929, p. 8.

that cannot be confused with metaphysical problems: however, questions concerning the choice of initial categories are properly philosophical and can be solved only with the reflective method.

Philosophy must clarify the concepts and the categories we have and in this sense it is common to all the sciences.

The problem of metaphysics is the problem of categories. Lewis did not refer to the “concrete universal Reality”, that transcends all particular phenomena and substantiates them: this is an empty idea, a philosophical myth that can work at least as a regulative ideal. A valid idea of “whole” can regard only experience and be limited within experience by concrete bounds. Metaphysics is rather concerned with abstract universals, that is it establishes the criteria for a correct use of the adjective “real”. It is in this sense that metaphysics will seek to establish the nature of reality: this is the only chance it has to stay within the reflective method, that is in the only field of its competence.

That the problem of metaphysics is the problem of the categories of reality is due to the fact that the predicate of “reality” is at the same time complex and ambiguous: the ascription of the predicate of reality to a content of experience takes place in a given description.

We understand reality only in a given description, i.e. mathematical reality, physical reality, mental reality, material reality. At the same time we understand that what is real in one description will be unreal in another. A dream, for example, is unreal because we take our images from physical things, however for the psychologist those images are the reality to be studied, the reality to analyse and unify under precise laws. And so for every content of experience, it will be real in one category or another⁴⁵.

“[...] every given content of experience is a reality of some sort or other; so that the problem of distinguishing real from unreal, the principles of which metaphysics seeks to formulate, is always a problem of right understanding, of referring the given experience to its proper category. [...]

The content of every experience is real when it is correctly understood, and is that kind of reality which it is then interpreted to be. Metaphysics is concerned to reveal just that set of major classifications of phenomena, and just those precise criteria of valid understanding, by which the whole array of given experience may be set in order and each item (ideally) assigned its intelligible and unambiguous place”⁴⁶.

⁴⁵ Some years later, Nelson Goodman, who was student of Lewis at Harvard, held that there is not a reality of which we can give infinite and different descriptions but that there are as many realities as there are the descriptions of them. The refutation of the “given” in his epistemology made this conceptual passage radical. However it had his origins in Lewis’ conviction that the problem of metaphysics is the problem of the categories of reality and that reality is what it is according the interpretation we give of it.

⁴⁶ LEWIS, *Mind and the World Order. Outline of a Theory of Knowledge* cit., pp. 11-12.

Although the categories are the criteria of the intelligibility of experience and cannot transcend it, in a certain sense they transcend experience: the categories stand above experience because they are a priori and prescriptive of experience. What reality is must be determined a priori because it must be comprehended on the basis of a priori criteria: these criteria can neither be afforded by experience – generalisations from experience not clarified, namely not classified as “real”, would be useless – nor they can be invalidated by experience: what does not correspond to the criteria is rather rejected.

Lewis insisted on this point, sharply distinguishing the notion of reality from the notion of the given:

“What the mind meets in experience is not independent reality, but an independent given; the given is not, without further ado, the real, but contains all the content of dream, illusion, and deceitful appearance”⁴⁷.

We prescribe the nature of reality, not the nature of the given. In other words we can predict the nature of reality but not the features of future experience. The only incontrovertible aspect of experience is that the given is absolutely given in experience. But it would be mute – Lewis said it is ineffable in itself – if it is not grasped in a conceptual structure.

However, it remained an ambiguity in Lewis’ philosophy for his conception of the given. If the problem of metaphysics is the problem of the categories, Lewis held, metaphysics is actually a systematic epistemology. But if knowledge occurs when concepts are applied to an independent element, this element should have some conditions.

Lewis recognised that the discussion between realism and idealism is both epistemological and metaphysical since it regards the relationship between subject and object, as namely a relationship in which one of the terms does not lie entirely within the relationship. He also maintained that there are some metaphysical assumptions fundamental for epistemology, for instance the reality to be known always transcends the content of actual experience, so it is in a certain sense presupposed by knowledge.

Paradoxically, to bring metaphysics into systematic epistemology Lewis needed to make a metaphysical assumption, i.e. the existence of an independent, given element within the constructive process of knowledge. So Lewis’ program remained unfinished, and revealed itself to be a quasi-reductive one; however, the path was clear, and was followed by the next generation of American philosophers.

⁴⁷ C.I. LEWIS, *Logic and Pragmatism*, in G.P. ADAMS / W.P. MONTAGUE (eds.), *Contemporary American Philosophy: Personal Statements*, vol. II, Macmillan & Co., New York 1930, pp. 31-51, in part. p. 47.

Abstract: In the first decades of the twentieth century new realistic tendencies arose in the United States as a reaction to the idealism dominating American academia. The foremost idealist at that time was Josiah Royce and the first realistic tendency against his idealism was directed by Ralph B. Perry and William P. Montague. In 1910 they promoted the manifesto of the American new realism.

In this paper I offer an analysis of the debate that led to the birth of the new realism: it will provide a different perspective on the history of American philosophy and will open new reflections on the impact of the debate.

In this debate “reality” was faced as an epistemological issue rather than an ontological one: the origin of this trend was an ambiguity in Royce’s work. Although initially new realists moved on the ground prepared by Royce, later they attempted to release the notion of reality from epistemology and to return it to metaphysics, claiming the priority of logic in both fields. However, the trend was definitively established by Clarence I. Lewis – a student of Royce and Perry at Harvard – who considered reality as the problem of the categories we use to speak correctly about our experience of the world. He established the rule that would be followed by the next generation of philosophers.

Key words: Constructive Idealism; New Realism; Reality; Experience; Categories; Given.

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