

‘Happiness is overrated: It’s better to be right.’ On Truth as Emergence

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Eating mushrooms in a restaurant involves an act of great faith in truth: the person who picked the mushrooms knew (or, in some unfortunate cases, thought he knew) that they were not poisonous, and this knowledge of his corresponded to a property of the world, namely the fact that the mushrooms were not poisonous. It also involves a no less important act of faith in humanity: people who, usually, we have never seen before and will never see again feed us with mushrooms that may be poisonous, but are not. It is hard to see why one should place an antithesis between the solidarity of the cook who is not poisoning us intentionally by adding cyanide to the mushrooms and the objectivity of the mushroom picker who was not mistaken. It is also hard to see why the cook’s solidarity should be bigger and more true than the picker’s objectivity if, prescinding from that objectivity, the cook gave us poisonous mushrooms, pursuing the humanitarian ideal of sparing us the inevitable pain of existence.

And yet, these are the assumptions of what I propose we call ‘post-realism’, i.e. the thesis – which dominated the philosophical debate of the second part of the past century – that reality and truth are historical notions, just as feudalism and courtly love, and that we can do without them, not so much for ontological parsimony but rather for an emancipative goal. Post-realism has two versions, the pragmatist and the nihilist. The first has the merit of being explicit: we must get rid of truth and reality, which (if we move from the prosaic mushroom example to the more sophisticated weaves between knowledge and power) are useless if not dangerous. The second is more insincere,

and argues that we should move beyond the realism / anti-realism issue, since it is not philosophically relevant. In a memorable confrontation with Richard Rorty,¹ Pascal Engel faced the pragmatist version.

In dialogue with Rorty in 2002, at a time when realism was still unpopular, Engel had the merit of reinstating the crucial philosophical opposition between realism and anti-realism and of proposing the theory of truth as correspondence. One can certainly demythologize truth and stop thinking that it has magical properties, as it were. But the best way to demythologize it is not to get fully rid of it, but rather to acknowledge where it lies: it is true that the *amanita phalloides* is poisonous, and this depends on the *amanita phalloides*, not on us.

In these pages, I would like to return to that debate by proposing an argument in favour of correspondentism, which I call 'truth as emergence.' In a way, truth pops up like a mushroom, emerging from the world towards other parts of the world – us. Which is the exact antithesis of Rorty's thesis according to which, after all, mushrooms are socially constructed too, and the *amanita phalloides* can become edible if society wishes so. And yet, a poisonous mushroom is such even if the United Nations Assembly decrees that it is not and the truth – if fortune (or misfortune, because the truth is not always welcome) helps us – can pop up like a mushroom, without anyone constructing or seeking it. Before describing the characteristics of truth as emergence I will outline the characteristics of internalism (i.e. the post-realist thesis that truth is completely internal to conceptual schemes) and externalism (i.e. the commonsense thesis that truth is the encounter between conceptual schemes and something external to them).

1. Internalism

As I have just said, post-realism is internalism: the argument that everything lies within conceptual schemes. This means that if a mushroom is poisonous, it is because of the conceptual frameworks that assess it as poisonous. At the origin of internalism there is a broadly political concern: objectivity is seen as an instrument of domination and an obstacle to solidarity, so that truth is regarded as something potentially dangerous or at least useless. With respect to

¹ P. Engel – R. Rorty, *A quoi bon la vérité*, Paris, Grasset 2005. English translation: *What's the Use of Truth*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2007. For the references mentioned in this article, and for a further clarification of my perspective, I refer the reader to my *Documentality. Why It Is Necessary to Leave Traces*, New York, Fordham University Press 2012.

this state of affairs, internalism plays a dual role. On the one hand, it lightens the weight of truth by making it suspect (truth is socially constructed, so there is nothing absolute); on the other hand, it proposes alternative perspectives: if truth is socially constructed and objectivity is a totalitarian myth, it is better to engage (in the pragmatist version) in more fruitful constructions, such as democracy, or (in the nihilist version) in more daring deconstructions, for example by stating that ' $2 + 2 = 4$ ' is a proposition of the same family as 'woman is by nature inferior to man.'

Analyzing the reasons of internalism, Engel pointed out that the Bush administration was the promoter of a potentially externalist objectivism, but he also noted that the fact that externalism has bad advocates is not enough to disqualify the appeal to objectivity.² And we can say more. At the time when Engel was dialoguing with Rorty, the Bush administration seemed to have abandoned its externalism (whether real or apparent) in order to embrace a radical internalism, arguing – *à la* Rorty, after all – that reality is not absolute, but simply the fixation of 'reality-based communities', where the Empire is able to construct its own reality³ (but then why pursue externalist degrading practices such as phone hackings?). This was a case of Fichtian internalism that, alone, suffices to make any kind of internalism problematic, including non-governmental and leftist ones.

But in general the whole internalist system seems to describe a wish of the heart rather than a philosophical theory. For example, the argument about the superiority of solidarity over objectivity does not consider the obvious counterexamples, such as the fact that the mafia is an extremely supportive organization that, moreover, relies on objective factors, such as the effectiveness of firearms. And when Rorty argues that 'our responsibilities are exclusively toward other human beings, not toward "reality,"'⁴ he seems to be placing human beings in the context of unreality, with the paradoxical outcome that we are responsible only towards unreality.

² P. Engel – R. Rorty, *What's the Use of Truth*, p. 74 fn.

³ I quote from "Reality-based Community" in *Wikipedia*: "The source of the term is a quotation in an October 17, 2004, *The New York Times Magazine* article by writer Ron Suskind, quoting an unnamed aide to George W. Bush (later attributed to Karl Rove): The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." ... "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality—judiciously, as you will—we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."

⁴ P. Engel – R. Rorty, *What's the Use of Truth*, p. 41.

The fact that internalism expresses a wish of the heart is the key to everything. On closer inspection, the basic problem of the internalist perspective is that it takes the fact / value dichotomy as valid, and then proposes to cancel the facts (objectivity) for the exclusive benefit of the values (solidarity). Thus there is a world of facts, which is regulated by causes and effects, and then a world of values transcending causes, magically surrounded by freedom. This contradicts everything we know of values: their binding character, their being able to go against our interests, their being much more solid and grounded than our philosophies. This is not to say that we can not change values, but we can be sure that if it depended on us and on our freedom we could change them without too much effort, which is not the case.

Values do not fall from the sky: they emerge from the world. Suffice it to think that the first value, the value of all values, is the real that imposes itself and demands our attention. Any value claims to hold for everyone, and nothing better represents this claim than the presence of something we cannot avoid nor amend: reality. For this reason, ethics is not conceivable without an ontology. Imagine a hyper-internalist world of values without facts. What kind of world would it be? And above all, would those values be such? I do not think so. Let us look at the experiment of the ethical brain, which is a variation of the *Gedankenexperiment* of the brain in a vat. The idea is this: imagine that a mad scientist has put some brains in a vat and is feeding them artificially. By means of electrical stimulation, these brains have the impression of living in a real world: some are evil and some are holy. But are they *really* evil or holy? Can we attribute values to a body-less and world-less brain? Would terms like 'happiness' or 'unhappiness' make sense at all if there were no outside world? I think not.

2. Externalism

The *British Medical Journal* has recently published the results of a somehow Rortian experiment.⁵ In the attempt at answering the question 'Do you care more about being happy or being right?' a husband was asked to always agree with his wife (even when he thought she was wrong). This seemed to drive the wife crazy, so the experiment ended after twelve days. As the *Los Angeles Times* put it when giving an account of the experiment, 'Happiness is overrated: It's better to be right.' Truth has a peculiar importance: it cannot

⁵ BMJ 2013;347:f7398.

simply be given by virtue of an intersubjective consensus, and it is the prerequisite of all our practices. Hence the inevitability of externalism, namely the argument that there are things actually independent of, and external to, conceptual schemes. Dinosaurs existed long before us, and the fact that they have never known to be called 'dinosaurs' does not deprive them of any essential property. Our perceptual apparatuses select a certain colour wave as 'white', but 'being white' is still a property of the snow and not of our eyes (which, we should not forget, are a part of the external world). Not to mention that a certain degree of externalism is the basis for the very notion of 'conceptual scheme': in order to really be a scheme (a form), it needs a content that lies outside itself.

Externalism also regards the sphere of words: 'dog' is external to 'cane' no less than the words 'dog' and 'cane' are external to (i.e. are not identical with) the being they refer to. These considerations suggest that the domain of internalism, which for the post-realist is immense, turns out to be rather small. Not only does the external world comprise natural and ideal objects (unless we want to confuse arithmetic with psychology or sociology), but, in many cases, it also includes social objects – an area where often one regards as 'socially constructed' what, at most, can be considered 'socially dependent'. Again, if – in agreement with Engel – we apply King Lear's principle 'I'll teach you differences,' we will realize that externalism exists in the sphere of social objects as well.

For example, the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales is unquestionably 'socially constructed', as we have the written documents proving the origin of the institution. Consequently, there are also responsibilities to be assigned. For example, in an institution that was significantly different from the EHESS, i.e. the Third Reich, Goering, by signing the document for the final solution of the Jewish problem, became responsible for genocide. One can also claim without too much difficulty that anti-Semitism is a socially constructed phenomenon. We have historical data that signal the deportation to Egypt or the Babylonian captivity, then the diaspora. Hence – with political, social and psychological motivations that one might be able to reconstruct – the genesis of anti-Semitism as a reaction to a sense of guilt, as a search for scapegoats, as the pursuit of economic gain, as religious fanaticism, and so forth.

I would have much more difficulty in saying that monotheism is socially constructed. Because not only there is no name or signature (as in the case of the final solution), but there are no generic historical testimonies either, unlike the case of anti-Semitism. One can make conjectures, but they would all be equivalent because we might never have any kind of historical evidence

on the social genesis of monotheism or polytheism. Therefore it is amusing and instructive to see that Hume explains how we went from polytheism to monotheism, while Schelling explains how we went from monotheism to polytheism.

Despite appearances, these difficulties are not empirical but transcendental. I have no difficulty in accepting that the monotheism of Akhenaten was socially constructed, given the historical evidence about a pharaoh's decision to impose (without success, the impact factor of Moses was much higher) a monotheistic worship of the sun. On the contrary, I have great difficulty in accepting the idea that monotheism, polytheism, or religion in general are socially constructed. One might say that Christianity is socially constructed and *a fortiori* Islam and Protestantism are, but I am not so sure about Judaism. Did the Jews know they were constructing a religion? And when did it start? It wasn't even called 'Judaism', and the covenant between God and Israel took place after the religion, at least if you believe in the Bible.

Here we are entering ancient ages, where the notion of 'social construction' seems to be problematic if not altogether ridiculous. Arguing that animals have a social organization is a form of anthropomorphism: the bee queen is not actually a queen. In the same way, one can do nothing but smile at Pliny when he speaks of the religion of elephants. Of course one can see a continuity between the alpha male in wolf packs and the CEOs of multinational corporations or bullies on facebook. But this proves, in fact, that 'alpha male' is *not* a socially constructed notion, since its origin lies in a past in which we cannot – if words have meaning and we are not willing to seriously support the thesis according to which the hermit crab is the ancestor of squatters – speak of society. Indeed, how could something be socially constructed at a time when there is no society in any serious sense of the term? Wolf packs do not bury the corpses of their members, they do not administer justice; they celebrate no weddings and have no taboo against incest or cannibalism. Rather than being 'socially constructed', the burial of the dead, the various forms of union between people, the administration of justice and taboos mark the passage from nature to culture. After them there can be social construction, but not before.

At this point, once there is a society (and a society, at least in its earliest forms, is not something socially constructed, otherwise we would enter the vicious circle of the social construction of society, which is the same circle we find in the social contract), through a gradual process – as gradual as the transition from early hominids to the *directeurs d'études* at the EHESS – we get to social constructions (absolute monarchy, interest rates) and to social justifications or discredits of natural facts. An enlightened culture blames the

alpha male, Clint Eastwood fans appreciate it, but the alpha male is neither socially constructed nor socially dependent, nor mind-dependent. The alpha male is part of nature, since nature admits hierarchical structures and, indeed, is inherently hierarchical – whereas the main effort of culture is to deconstruct this hierarchy.

Now, let us consider the gender issue, one of the flagships and underlying motivations of internalism and social construction. To say that genders are socially constructed is very important from the political point of view, since the strong ideological weight of the category of 'nature' makes it more enticing to say that women or slaves have different *physei*, thereby justifying their subordination. But, if things are as I said, this is only a rhetorical move, which is understandable, but unfounded: the subordination of women and slavery are *socially dependent*.

Philosophically speaking, the opposition to slavery, female subordination etc. is the one to be *socially constructed*. And the most significant thing is that the reasons for the opposition do not depend on the solidarity-related strategies of some benevolent internalism, but on the perception of something that was both social and external to consciousness. At some point, in *some* cultures (and not in others) slavery or the subordination of women appeared unacceptable, and we proceeded to the social construction of anti-slavery and anti-sexism. But these phenomena we now react against were long part of society, along with the alpha male, and belonged to a legacy prior to the formation of society itself – which, by the way, explains why they appear so beastly. From this point of view, history is indeed a revelation in which pieces of a huge non-constructed collective unconscious progressively come forward. And it is very likely that, within a few years, many other pieces of this unconscious will appear, as history goes much faster today than ever before.

3. Emergentism

As I mentioned above, in *King Lear* we find the famous sentence: 'I'll teach you differences'. In *Hamlet* we find another well-known and often quoted passage: 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy'. There are many more differences in things than in the spirits contemplating them. The Inuit people have ten names for the colour white. This is not because the names create the colours, but simply because the colours are there and emerge in the environment, standing out much better as they are all together, so that their comparison and differentiation become eas-

ier. The fifty shades of gray we see do not depend on the famous pornographic novel, but on the fact that gray is in fashion, and this has made it easier to recognize different shades of this colour; these shades certainly existed prior to the names, as shown by the fact that so many colours are named after flowers. This is the fundamental intuition behind emergentism.

In the first section I showed the unsustainability of a generalized internalism. In the second I showed you how the scope of externalism is much broader than we are willing to admit. At this point, however, there is a rather obvious question, which concerns truth. Internalism erases the notion of 'truth', making it indistinguishable from error. On the contrary, externalism gives great importance to truth, but at the same time it comes across the difficulties of the theory of correspondence, which Engel rightly considers essential but problematic. In fact, there is an inherent difficulty in the idea that the mind relates to the world producing a magical event that we call 'truth.' Now, the magical bit is already greatly reduced if we integrate correspondentism with coherentism, instead of opposing them.

It may be true that if we look at *our* body, *this* paper, *this* fire, we might be overwhelmed with sceptical doubts. But these doubts, so plausible when we are alone, are much reduced in a sphere of interaction and interobservation. Typically, when a philosopher wants to be a sceptic, he explains his scepticism by questioning the existence of things that are on his desk, and not those found on a restaurant table surrounded by diners (with a form of coherentism that, in fact, confirms correspondentism) interacting with one another and proving the existence of the external world. It may be objected that the interaction between coherentism and correspondentism is an antiseptical *ontological* argument, that still does not solve the epistemological difficulties of correspondentism: in fact, how does the mind faithfully represent the world? I would like to respond to this objection with the theory of emergentism, which means the following: the mind relates to the world without difficulty because, first of all, it does not represent it, but rather *records* it and, secondly, because in most cases it is not we who seek the world, but the world seeks us, encountering us and often upsetting us.

Let me try and clarify what I mean. Austin rightly said that, just like with marriage, it takes two to make a truth. We could push the metaphor a little further noting that, just like the spouses, the two poles of truth are rarely equivalent, if ever. There is a solemn concept of truth, the one that is sanctioned by the Nobel laureates in physics, in which one partner chased the other across seas and mountains, and sees truth as the culmination of a romantic epic. But there is also an ordinary concept of truth in which the partner has found a soul

mate next door, without any effort. Or one may realize too late that the soul mate was the one who wanted to get married at all costs, and that the partner was not even that much of a soul mate, after all. Of course these are anthropomorphisms, but they clearly illustrate why certain things always appeared to be obviously true without us ever reflecting on them. It also explains why unexpected or unpleasant truths appear before us, with irrefutable evidence, and without us ever seeking them.

Now, the mind does not necessarily have to represent the world for the encounter between mind and world to take place in the form of correspondism. The Aristotelian theory of knowledge, which lies at the basis of correspondism, is not a representational theory – a sign that correspondism in itself implies by no means representationism. Aristotle's thesis is that the form of things is placed in the soul, without the substance, but that does not mean that the forms are present in analogical form: the soul does not turn green or square when it sees something green or square. That this is not a kind of representation is made clear by the fact that Aristotle, like all ancient philosophers, does not compare the soul to a dark room or a canvas, but to a wax tablet: a writing surface on which thoughts and feelings are imprinted. Note that the Greek writing was alphabetical, not ideographic, and what was imprinted were not images, but the symbolic or stenographic recordings of things. This is even more evident in Plato, who argues that first there is a writer, which only later is joined by a painter who illustrates impressions (in terms of *reconstruction* of experience, not of experience itself, one imagines).

These correspondist theories assume a theory of truth as recording, not as a representation. A trace is recorded, and the gradual accumulation of traces produces knowledge, which can be adequate even if it is not necessarily representative (it is not similarity that makes us think that when we create a mental image of our parents we are thinking of our parents!). It is essential to note that statements are not 'representations' of states of affairs: there is no similarity. We have no difficulty in thinking that our inner painter does not exactly belong to the figurative school: a state of things, which is imprinted in many different forms, emerges. What we cannot do without and is absolutely necessary is the recording that allows what emerges from the outside to be imprinted.

In the frame of the emergentist theory of truth – which, I repeat, cannot be considered separately from correspondism and coherentism – there may well be competence (a true ontological relationship with something) without understanding (an epistemological relationship). Objects exert a peculiar affordance towards us and interact with us with an 'invitation' that, in the case of artefacts, was not even present in the mind of the inventor (the person who

invented coffee cups did not foresee their use as pen holders, and the person who invented the cell phone did not foresee its evolution into a typewriter and archive). The gradualist theory of knowledge in Leibniz illustrates this point very well: we have obscure perceptions, clear but confused, and only occasionally clear and distinct ones. As we can see, we are dealing with an evolutionary theory of truth, which regards representationalism as an emergence that is rather sporadic in the cognitive process.

This competence without understanding appears in a countless number of demonstrations in the constant interaction not only between human beings (who share the same world, but look at it from different perspectives), but also between beings who have totally heterogeneous perceptual apparatuses and conceptual schemes – or none at all. It would obviously be difficult to argue that this interaction is made possible by the sharing of conceptual schemes or representations. What kind of representations could I share with a bat when I am trying to dodge it, while helping it understand where the window is, so that it can go out? Once we have made all these considerations, we will understand that the concept of evidence has nothing mystical or subjective about it. The ‘feeling of evidence’ is certainly something that may accompany wrong evidence – no one has ever denied that error is possible. Rather than the sign of truth, evidence must be considered (along with surprise and disappointment) as belonging to the realm of all those experiences that demonstrate the emerging nature of the real, its coming from the world toward the subject, and not the opposite. This can undoubtedly be a source of bad surprises, but it is also true that without the world words like ‘happiness’ and ‘unhappiness’ would not make sense. Indeed, ‘happiness is overrated: It’s better to be right.’