

Some Reflections on the Relationship between Realism and Conceptual Relativism

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1. External Realism or Perceptual Realism

In this article I intend to maintain that the argument of conceptual relativism cannot be considered a refutation of realism; or rather, I will argue that conceptual relativism is compatible with realism. The idea of the relativity of conceptual schemes is a very old one and in many aspects sound, as any system that classifies objects, every set of categories, all conceptual schemes for describing the world are conventional and therefore arbitrary.¹ For this reason, numerous philosophers maintain that conceptual relativism is inconsistent with external realism, thus affirming that if we were to accept conceptual relativism *ipso facto*, we would be forced to refute realism.

Before I argue my point I feel I should clarify my realist viewpoint. I certainly don't intend to enter into the tangle of the different 'realisms' here: metaphysical realism, naïve realism, empirical realism, scientific realism, logical realism, ethical realism, etc. To clarify my position and define the realist perspective I intend to use, I will initially refer to the notion of realism formulated by John Searle, 'external realism'. This form of weak metaphysical realism is not a theory of truth, nor a theory of cognition, or a theory of language, but an ontological theory, which can be summed up in the following thesis: 'The world exists independently of our representation of it'. A world, note, which is not necessarily the one we access cognitively, but which could also be an unknowable *noumenon*. It follows that if we assume that the human species had never existed on Earth and,

¹ See John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 60.

therefore, no human had ever been able to formulate representations of it, much of the world would have remained unchanged, as the world exists beyond thought, language, perception, etc.

Realism thus understood refers to the existence of an external reality as an assumption of our discourse, its construction and comprehension, and decrees that our existence as perceiving subjects is irrelevant in relation to the existence of the world. In this sense, it is correct to consider realism as an ontological theory: it says that there is a reality independent of our representations and that this does not imply the existence of a specific conceptual scheme to describe it, but rather that many descriptive models of reality can be constructed, which are not comparable to each other.

Realism is not an explanatory theory of the world, a thesis concerning what the world is really like: it does not, therefore, explain how things are, but affirms that there is a way in which things are independent of our representations of them. It does not state that the world should be in a certain way rather than another, but that there is a way in which it has formed that is entirely independent of our representations of it.² There is, then, a clear alterity between the representations and the objects represented, even if we assume that the only effective reality is composed solely of mental states.

If, for the anti-realist, the existence of chairs, drums and gibbons depends on our representations of them - that is, there is no reality independent of the mind - for the realist, even if material objects did not exist, there would still be a reality independent of representations, as the inexistence of material objects would constitute a particular characteristic of that reality independently of any representations.

The fact that chairs, drums and gibbons exist is a belief that is justified by the fact that we perceive these objects: we perceive chairs, drums and gibbons because chairs, drums and gibbons exist. A philosophy that upholds realism, then, cannot abandon the vision of the world that derives from

² See Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifesto of New Realism* (New York: SUNY, 2014).

common sense. The hypothetical ‘man on the street’ with no particular competence and the scientist with a command of the most advanced knowledge implicitly share fundamental convictions about themselves, their fellow men, the world in general, and only under certain conditions declare them explicitly: we are talking, naturally, about common sense convictions. As Thomas Reid would have said, being shared by us all from infancy onwards, these convictions are sufficient to form an inevitable assumption in our relationships with others.³

For example, that the artefact called ‘chair’ which I am sat on, and that the room in which I am sitting and its furnishing of things, cannot suddenly disappear is inevitably assumed by everything that we say and do, independently of our current scientific knowledge.

We certainly do not doubt, from a microphysical viewpoint, for example, that the bed we usually lie on to rest is not a solid object: an object mainly composed of material in a solid state, whose spatial boundaries appear to be well defined. Nonetheless, the bed is part of our lives as an object we know and use, based on these properties: this is part of the bed’s current way of being and cannot be confuted by any physical theory whose specific knowledge says nothing about what the bed looks like to us. The scientific image of the bed would belie the image visualized only if the latter were assumed to be an exhaustive representation of the bed, which it clearly is not, and neither is its scientific image: the two images can evidently coexist⁴.

2. *A bio-evolution argument: the function of visual perception*

If we adopt a realist view, perception becomes of fundamental importance as a source of *adequate* and *reliable* information about the common sense world. In this context we should specify what meaning we assign to the terms ‘adequate’ and ‘reliable’ with reference to knowledge of the

³ See Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Power of Man* (ed. by B.A. Brody, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1969).

⁴ On the relationship between scientific knowledge and ordinary knowledge see Mariano Bianca, Paolo Piccari (eds.), *Epistemology of Ordinary Knowledge* (Newcastle u.T: Cambridge Scholars, forthcoming).

world. Information is considered ‘reliable’ if we hold that it corresponds in some way to the state or the structure of the things it refers to. The term ‘adequate’, on the other hand, refers to the relationship between the information and the purpose we seek to achieve: information is adequate if it helps reach a certain objective. In theory, information can be unreliable but adequate: this is why the two criteria are connected but not necessarily reliant upon each other, although under many conditions the reliability of information can be a significant factor in determining its adequacy.

Every human being shares with his fellow living creatures the way of knowing the world through sight. Although in man seeing is a more complex process due to the involvement of various cortical, subcortical and non-cortical areas, it fulfils the same function in all living organisms with a visual apparatus: as occurs with all perceptual apparatuses, this function is essentially to collect information of use in order to know the world and act within it. Images are not ‘photos’ of the world, except in the sense that, by receiving and transforming electromagnetic waves (or photons, according to the corpuscular conception of light), they ‘report’ the figural attributes of objects in the physical world to specific neuronal structures. Rather, they constitute mental contents generated by extensive neurophysiological (neuropsychological) activity, which is characterized and distinguished from others because it brings with it figural information, as well as another kind of information: information that is produced in various ways by the cortical areas responsible for sight.

The biological role of sight is what allows humans to function adequately in the world; this is why there absolutely has to be a close structural relationship between image and world (the same is true, albeit in a different manner, for the other forms of perception). Although humans mostly no longer live in natural environments, the biological functions of visual perception are fully compatible with the ‘artificial’ world and essentially work in the same way, by forming ‘visual representations’ of the world.

At this point it is legitimate to ask whether the results of the processes of visual perception provide a ‘reliable representation’ of the world: a representation that corresponds how things are. However, this question can, in part, be bypassed if we carefully consider the biological (and psychological) role of sight.

Let’s, then, ask a naïve question: *why do we have eyes?* Can we find a reason to assert that this question can be answered clearly and unequivocally? Such questions, which psychologists and philosophers frequently ask themselves, are apparently naïve but essentially fundamental. Simple reflection on our own experience allows us to understand that eyes are simply the biological structure that makes it possible to generate visual knowledge of the world, which is fundamental in order to move, avoid obstacles, seek sources of energy, and establish relationships with the environment we live in and with objects or other living beings.

More generally, why do all living beings have a perceptual system they use to collect information about their environment? The answer lies in the generation and structure of life on our planet, which has mainly produced living beings known as heterotrophic organisms, as they do not possess the energy necessary for the maintenance of their stable equilibrium or, in other words, for their own survival. All living beings, with the exclusion of none, need to acquire energy externally and therefore need ‘sensors’ that allow them to acquire it, meaning to recognize and distinguish the sources of energy and know where to find them; hence the need for mechanisms that allow the organism to move physically in space to reach sources of energy.

Visual perception is therefore a way of finding sources of energy and, on the basis of the information acquired, moving in space to reach it, be it prey, grass, trees or something else (including food products on supermarket display shelves). If this were not the model of life on Earth, in other words if organisms were not heterotrophic, then perceptual sensors would not be useful. Only in this case - if we found, for example, an organism with ‘eyes’ - would it become legitimate to ask

why it had them or what it needed them for. Instead, in our condition, there can only be a simple answer to the question, based on objective biological and evolutionary evidence: that these ‘eyes’ are necessary to ‘know’ the world (with all the related consequences). Biological evolution has managed to generate, or we could say select, the best sensory systems, or the most reliable and adequate ones, to best fulfil their function.

Perceptual systems were generated for this world and not for another (although they could work adequately in another similar world, or in much of our known universe). Thus, being ‘made’ for this world, we can ask whether evolution has failed altogether, and generated useless perceptual systems, or whether it has been successful (at least partially) in generating perceptual systems ‘adapted’ or at least adequate to work in this world. If we answered that biological evolution has failed we should assert, for example, that our eyes have no function at all and we could do without them, or they could even be deactivated. Evidence cannot but refute this idea - if nothing else, because (except in the case of diseases) eyes are simply useful to ‘detect’ where objects are in space: an operation that is not only complex, but fundamental for getting around in this world.

If, on the other hand, biological evolution has been at least partially successful, then the question becomes predictable and the answer obvious, although it is useful to mention it. Acceptance of this answer gives rise, first and foremost, to a consequence debated by philosophers for many centuries: that perceptions provide more or less reliable information about the world (a correspondence between structure of the world and perceptual contents); about how it ‘appears’, not about how it is structurally formed and which ‘laws’ guide and regulate its processes. If it were not so, it could legitimately be claimed that biological evolution has provided perceptual systems that are deceptive and useless.

Then we could acknowledge the sceptical hypothesis: senses are deceptive. Living beings possess perceptual systems, and this is evident, but it could be claimed that they are deceptive: that per-

ceptual systems that do not provide reliable (and in this case not adequate) information with which to recognize the environment and act within it. Of what use would they be, then, if (as we have clarified) all living beings on the planet need to find sources of energy in their surrounding environment?

Cartesian's invitation not to trust the senses, which can be deceptive, and to take into consideration the possibility of an evil demon who makes fun of us, is famous:

Verumtamen infixae quaedam est meae menti vetus opinio, Deum esse qui potest omnia, & a quo talis, qualis existo, sum creatus. Unde autem scio illum fecisse ut plane sit terra, nullum coelum, nulla res extensa, nulla figura, nulla magnitudo, nullus locus, & tamen haec omnia non aliter quam nunc mihi videantur existere? [...] Supponam igitur non optimum Deum, fontem veritatis, sed genium aliquem malignum, eundemque summe potentem & callidum, omnem sua industriam in eo posuisse, ut me falleret: putabo caelum, aërem, terram, colores, figuras, sonos, cunctaque externa nihil aliud esse quam ludificationes somniorum, quibus insidias credulitati meae tetendit.⁵

As it is known, this argument has a contemporary version: Putnam's hypothesis of brains in a vat.⁶ This version of the Cartesian evil demon, according to which our knowledge of the external world is systematically false, as everything we perceive is no more than the result of the manipulation of our experiential phenomenology by a scientist who keeps our brains in a life-sustaining liquid attached to a computer that simulates every need of our minds. For the sceptic it is impossible for us to discover whether or not we are brains in vats: in fact, if everything we believe and refer to is only the result of an illusion, this means that we do not possess failsafe means with which to justify the legitimacy of our representations of the world.

We could object that even if our sensory organs perceive an astutely created illusory reality, they would in any case perceive a 'reality': the piece of marble falling on my foot could be an illusory phenomenon, but there is no doubt that this phenomenon is capable of causing me physical harm, as

⁵ René Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, I, 21-22 (ed. par G. Rodis-Lewis, Paris: Vrin, 1978).

⁶ See Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

a consequence of which I will feel pain, the possibly illusory nature of which is not sufficient to lessen it.

Psychologists could produce a great number of examples to highlight a certain unreliability of perceptions, but they should also produce an incomparably larger number of examples in which perceptions are reliable, as occurs in the majority of everyday situations.

If perceptual processes have a certain degree of reliability and adequacy, it follows that they generate representations that are reliable (not true, as we are not talking about ‘truth’ here) or at least considered as such, meaning that they are semantically referable in a reliable way to how things are in the world (which leads, as mentioned above, to their possible adequacy). Does this thesis, which is part of a ‘realist conception’, conflict with others, which are sometimes called ‘constructivism’ or ‘anti-realist conceptualism’? The answer is yes: this is a realist conception *tout court*, according to which there is a world beyond the perceiving subject, whoever and however that subject is, and perceptual systems provide a reliable (and adequate) representation of this world, meaning one that more or less corresponds to its structure and the state in which it is perceived. The *reliable representation* in this case is understood as a structure that is *isomorphic* (in the sense that we will specify to a portion of the world: this reliable representation does not lead to an explanatory knowledge of the ‘causes’ behind events and the ‘effective constitution’ of beings or objects, but is reliable in a descriptive way).

In the case of human beings perceptions are influenced by non-perceptual or other contents, such as concepts, but this does not invalidate the thesis according to which the world and its perceptual representation are made for each other, and therefore the representation must to a certain extent ‘report’ the structure of the world in any neurophysiological codification, so that perception fully and correctly fulfils its primary biological function, in common with other living beings: to provide use-

ful information about the world in order to maximize life expectancy and contribute to the preservation of the species we belong to.

Systems of visual perception are formed *for a specific world* and their structure is consistent with and adequate for that world. If there were no forms, textures, distances, colours, etc. in a given world, a visual system would not be constituted in the same way as if they did exist. The visual system was not formed for a uniform or homogeneous world, but for a different and heterogeneous world, which is why it is suited to detecting dissimilarities and discontinuity.

From an evolutionary viewpoint, therefore, the visual system was formed for this world: there are no eyes for another world, but only for this one (or for any other like it), therefore the visual information that the system receives is consistent with its composition, and it receives information based on the way in which it is constituted. Thus, for example, information is received not only regarding the form and colour or details of an object, but regarding its position in space and all its spatial relationships with others and with its background, which is fundamental to its identification by the visual system. In other words, eyes, and in particular human eyes, do not *invent a world*, but receive information from the world.

The information received, in turn, *is organized in accordance with the organization of the world*, and it is precisely this *reconstructive isomorphism* of the visual system that allows us to have visual knowledge of the world. For this reason, the visual system *reconstructs* the world as it is, and its results are a reorganization of the information ‘incorporated’ in objects; there are no eyes for all possible objects, but eyes for well-defined and specific objects, and the structure of the eye has been determined from an evolutionary viewpoint by the structure of the phenomenal world. In fact, there

would be no cones and rods if the world were uniform: without measures, colours, distances, objects and relations between them⁷.

Thus at the core of perceptual realism there is above all the notion of isomorphism⁸, by virtue of which images correspond to the world and the world corresponds to perceptions. The correspondence, reliability and adequacy of representations in relation to the world, which allow individuals to act in the world on the basis of visual information (as happens on a daily basis not only in the life of humans, but also in that of other living beings) are based on the notion of isomorphism. On the basis of isomorphism, perceptual images occupy the ‘place’ of phenomenal objects in the mind, and thus ‘represent’ them. Thanks to perceptual images, the mind possesses a structure of the world in which objects and their relationships are figurally represented; the set of representations constitutes a phenomenal and codified (or *reconstructed*) world, which, in the mind, substitutes the external world.

3. Realism and Conceptual Relativism Can Coexist

Numerous philosophers assert that if we accepted conceptual relativism we would *ipso facto* be forced to refute realism. In reality, conceptual relativism and realism are anything but incompatible philosophical orientations: the first affirms only that there is a reality to be described, while the second maintains that a series of concepts and a vocabulary need to be selected in order to describe it.

The idea of the relativity of concepts consists in the affirmation that all systems for the classification of objects, all sets of categories to ‘divide’ the world, all *conceptual schemes* to describe different

⁷ See Mariano Bianca, *La mente immaginale. Immaginazione, immagini mentali, pensiero e pragmatica visuali* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2009), pp. 51-58.

⁸ We speak of isomorphism, especially in algebra, when there is a biunivocal correspondence between two structured sets, or two complex structures can be ‘mapped’ onto each other, so that each part of a structure has a corresponding part in the other structure, where ‘corresponding’ means that the two parts play similar roles in their respective structures. For example, a compact wooden cube and a compact lead cube are both compact cubes: even if they are made of different materials, their geometric structures are isomorphic; or a pack of 52 playing cards with red backs and a pack of 52 playing cards with yellow backs: even if the colour of the back is different, the packs are structurally isomorphic.

states of things, are *conventional* (and, therefore, more or less arbitrary), so that ‘how things are’ depends, at least in part, on the conceptual scheme adopted. In other words, we can ‘identify’ *a way in which things are* by virtue of certain *concepts*, through which we identify and classify the elements that constitute reality and their relationships. It is therefore possible to epistemically ‘access’ the objects in the world only via a conceptual scheme, meaning via a process of conceptualization: the world cannot, therefore, be described or known except in conceptual terms.⁹ The state of things described, for example, by the statement ‘the ship sails the Atlantic Ocean’ is characterized at least by the concepts of ‘ship’, ‘to sail’ and ‘Atlantic Ocean’. These concepts are evidently part of one or more conceptual schemes: the state of things described by the statement ‘the ship sails the Atlantic Ocean’ is therefore only ‘accessible’ via one or more conceptual schemes which include the concepts of ‘ship’, ‘to sail’ and ‘Atlantic Ocean’.

The world is organized according to the conceptual scheme we adopt. If every true description of the world is always true within a certain vocabulary, a certain conceptual scheme, then the consequence of conceptual relativism will be that every true description is always made in relation to a conceptual scheme that we have adopted to describe the world, so that, to use Putnam’s words, «how many objects there are in the world [...] is relative to the choice of a conceptual scheme»¹⁰ and «objects do not exist independently of conceptual schemes»¹¹.

In this context, reference is often made to a famous example of Putnam’s: consider a world of only three individuals - x_1 , x_2 , x_3 . How many objects are there in this world? If I said to consider a world of only three objects, what sense does the question have? Aren’t there three objects? Can there be non-abstract beings that do not count as individuals? Common sense would say ‘no’. But if, like Lésniewski and other Polish logicians, I maintain that for every two objects there is one ob-

⁹ See Maria Baghramian, *Relativism* (London-New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 214-218.

¹⁰ Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (La Salle, ILL: Open Court, 1987), p. 32.

¹¹ *Reason, Truth, and History*, p. 52.

ject which is their sum, I have to admit, ignoring the so-called ‘null object’, that there are seven: x_1 , x_2 , x_3 , $x_1 + x_2$, $x_1 + x_3$, $x_2 + x_3$, $x_1 + x_2 + x_3$.¹² One of the axioms of mereology, in fact, states that ‘every non-empty set has a sum’, which leads to the theorem according to which ‘for each α and for each β , there is a δ , which is the sum of α and β ’.¹³

How many objects, then, are really present in the example proposed by Putnam? Are there three or seven? The possible answer to this type of question will always depend on the arbitrarily pre-selected conceptual scheme. If by ‘object’ we mean an individual object, then there are three objects; if, on the other hand, by ‘object’ we refer not only to individual objects, but also to their mereological sum, then there are seven objects. For example, the statement itself ‘There are three objects in the world’ can be considered true in one scheme and false in another. It follows that the statement ‘There are only three objects’ is *true* in our conceptual scheme and *false* in that of Lésniewski. Nonetheless it is appropriate to point out that we are using different notions of object: the statement ‘There are only three objects’ is therefore ambiguous, as it expresses different propositions according to whether it is us or Lésniewski using it, even though there is no single proposition that is true for us and false for the Polish logician.

If realism consists in the thesis according to which *reality exists independently of our representations of it and perceptual images are adequate and reliable*, while conceptual relativism implies the thesis that *all representations of reality are expressed through a system of concepts chosen more or less arbitrarily*, it appears difficult to maintain that conceptual relativism is not coherent with realism:

¹² See *The Many Faces of Realism*, pp. 46-48. See also Hilary Putnam, *Realism with Human Face* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹³ See Stanislaw Lésniewski, ‘Foundations of the General Theory of Sets’ (1916), in Stanislaw Lésniewski, *Collected Works*, ed. by Surma, S. J., Szrednicki, J. T., Barnett, D. I., and Rickey, V. F., (Dordrecht/Warszawa: Kluwer/Polish Scientific Publishers, 1992), pp. 129-173; Alfred Tarski, ‘Appendix E’, in Joseph H. Woodger (ed.), *The Axiomatic Method in Biology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1937), pp. 161-172.937; Henry S. Leonard, Nelson Goodman ‘The Calculus of Individuals and Its Users’, *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, 5 (1940), 45-55; Willard Van Orman Quine, Nelson Goodman, ‘Steps Toward a Constructive Nominalism’, *The Journal of Symbolic Logic*, 12 (1946), 97-122. See also David K. Lewis, *Parts of Classes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).; Achille C. Varzi, ‘Mereological Commitments’, *Dialectica*, 54 (2000), 283-305; ‘Mereology’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (CSLI: Stanford, CA, 2003), on line; ‘The Universe among Other Things’, *Ratio*, 19 (2006), 107-120.

the first presupposes only that there is a reality external to the perceiving subject, while the second affirms that a set of concepts and a vocabulary need to be selected to describe the reality. Why should these conceptions be irreconcilable? Reality's independence of our representations does not preclude the possibility of describing it according to the conceptual scheme that we adopt within a given social and cultural community and in a specific moment in time.

Where, then, is the inconsistency of realism in relation to conceptual relativism? Think, for example, of the Amazon rainforest and consider what it was like before the appearance of human beings. We imagine that men arrive and describe the facts in different ways, because there are different vocabularies, different ways of counting one or more forests, etc. Now consider the possibility that at a certain point in time humans cease to exist: does this event make any difference to the existence of the Amazon rainforest and the facts that concern it? Evidently not, because different descriptions of facts, objects, etc., change in time, but the facts and objects themselves remain unchanged. This means that different conceptual schemes permit different descriptions of the same reality and that there are no descriptions of reality beyond all conceptual schemes: all this is clearly of no relevance to the soundness of realism. In other words, realism based on the perceptual activity of the individual allows for an unlimited number of true descriptions of a single reality, formulated in the light of different conceptual schemes.

It therefore makes no sense to use conceptual relativism as an argument against realism because the former presupposes the latter, as it provides for a reality independent of language, which can be circumscribed or defined using different vocabularies. Thus different conceptual schemes allow for different descriptions of the same reality and there are no descriptions of reality beyond all the possible conceptual schemes. This evidently has no relevance for the soundness of realism, which, in any case, is based on individuals' perceptual activity, allowing for an unlimited number of true descriptions of a single reality formulated in the light of different conceptual schemes.

As observed by Searle, the thesis argued by Goodman - that we make stars by drawing certain boundaries rather than others - is unintelligible, and would only be intelligible if we presuppose something upon which boundaries could be traced:

Now we thus make constellations by picking out and putting together certain stars rather than others, so we make stars by drawing certain boundaries rather than others. Nothing dictates whether the sky shall be marked of into constellations or others objects, we have to make what we find, be it the Great Dipper, Sirius, food, fuel, or a stereo system.¹⁴

While it is legitimate to state that a description can only be formulated with reference to a conceptual scheme, we cannot, however, argue that the objects/events described can only exist in relation to that scheme. Conceptual relativism is a possible explanation of the way in which we determine the application of our concepts: it is then up to the community of speakers to decide what corresponds to a correct application of the concept of 'eagle' or 'fork', which is therefore arbitrary. When, however, we have established the meaning of such concepts in our vocabulary according to arbitrary definitions, we cannot blame conceptual relativism or the arbitrary nature of the choice of conceptual scheme if characteristics independent of the representation of the world may match those definitions, since the characteristics of the world that match or fail to match the definitions exist independently of them or of any other definition.

We can 'arbitrarily' define the concept of 'eagle' based on empirical experiences and generalization based on them. But once we have defined the concept of 'eagle', whether or not an object meets the requirements for belonging to the concept of 'eagle' is no longer arbitrary or relative. The way in which we apply the word 'eagle' depends exclusively on us: it is an irrefutable fact that there is an object that exists independently of that use and corresponds to that use. In contrast to Goodman's argument, we do not construct 'worlds', but descriptions which the external world corre-

¹⁴ Nelson Goodman, *On Starmaking*, in Peter J. McCormick (ed.), *Starmaking: Realism, Anti-Realism, and Irrealism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), p. 145.

sponds to, or not. Nonetheless this implies that a reality exists independently of our conceptual scheme; otherwise there would be nothing to apply our concepts to.

Conceptual relativism simply affirms that reality has to be described according to different conceptual schemes. However, this does not appear to be a problem for the realist. The facts that different conceptual schemes allow us to formulate different descriptions of the world and that no descriptions of the world exist beyond conceptual schemes do not constitute a problem for realism¹⁵. This is the point to be made against the famous analyses of Goodman and Putnam: whether constellations are made arbitrarily by humans putting together certain stars rather than others, or whether (given the theses of certain well-known Polish logicians) even a gesture as simple as counting the objects in a specific part of the world is equally arbitrary, and such counts are incompatible with each other, is a question of different ways of describing reality, or rather the criteria used to do so.

If, therefore, we consider realism from a perceptual viewpoint as the conception according to which *the reality we perceive exists independently of our representations of it, which in any case are adequate and reliable in relation to the objects/events perceived*, and conceptual relativism as the point of view according to which *all representations of reality are expressions of a conceptual scheme chosen more or less arbitrarily*, it seems difficult to maintain that conceptual relativism, which underpins the conventionalist argument, is incoherent with realism: the first presupposes that there is a reality external to the perceiving subject, while the second affirms that a set of concepts and a vocabulary need to be selected to describe it. Why, then, should these conceptions be irreconcilable? Reality's independence of our representations, indeed, does not preclude the possibility of describing it according to the conceptual scheme we adopt within a given social and cultural com-

¹⁵ Searle, p. 165.

munity and at a particular moment in time¹⁶. The fact that reality exists independently of us and of our representations of it does not imply that there is a special conceptual scheme to describe it; thus, the wealth of conceptual schemes through which it is possible to provide a description of the world is irrelevant in relation to the ‘fundamental thesis of realism’, which tells us only that the world exists independently of our representations of it and that sensory information that derives from our perceptions ‘speaks’ to us of a phenomenal world that exists beyond us - with or without an evil demon.

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¹⁶ See Hilary Putnam, *Philosophy in an Age of Science. Physics, Mathematics and Skepticism* (Cambridge, Ma – London: Harvard University Press, 2012), II.

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