

The Anthropocentrism of Anti-Realism

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“When he woke up,
 The dinosaur was still there.”
 Augusto Monterroso

1.

An aspect which has been largely overlooked within the contemporary debate over realism and anti-realism is the role of the ‘human’ that these contrasting theories presuppose. My thesis is that metaphysical anti-realism, specifically the one dealing with material reality (I am not speaking, for instance, of the one concerning social objects), is an anthropocentric approach to reality, notwithstanding all the reasonings that can be used in order to maintain it. By the term ‘anthropocentrism’, I am referring to the philosophical concept that considers humans to be the main beings in the universe. Specifically, anthropocentrism is expressed by the theory arguing that the species *Homo sapiens* has an ontological pre-eminence over reality¹.

¹ I am grateful to the attendees who participated in the “Welcome Antispeciesism” debate that took place in December 2012 at the “Mangiacarte” bookshop in Catania, and to those who took part in the debate named “Being animals: a comparison between philosophy and psychology”, that took place in January 2013 at the “Enzo Tortora” association in

2.

In order to immediately show the roots of my thesis, let me speak in general terms: along with the philosophical literature concerning the theme, anti-realism can be defined as the theory stating that one or more classes of objects depend on us. On the contrary, realism affirms that one or more classes of objects do not depend on us². At least from a postmodern perspective, paradoxically, anti-realism has been approved for its emancipatory merits³: against totalitarianisms, hermeneutics allows us to deconstruct the imposition of other people’s truths. This fallacy of reality’s denial – as if it were an added value supporting our species’ political emancipation – has recently been analyzed and contested by Maurizio Ferraris with his theoretical proposal called ‘New Realism’⁴: here Ferraris af-

Milan, where for the first time I informally presented the theories discussed here. I also thank Maurizio Ferraris for the discussions concerning realism and anti-realism and for having lead me to this philosophical debate. One first version of this essay has appeared in Italian as the final chapter of L. Caffo, *Zampe come gambe: la questione dei diritti animali*, goWare, Pisa 2013

² Miller, Alexander, “Realism”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2012 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/realism/>>.

³ A paradigmatic case is represented by Gianni Vattimo – Cf. Vattimo, Gianni, *A Farewell to Truth*, Columbia University Press, New York 2011

⁴ Ferraris, Maurizio, *Manifesto of New Realism*, SUNY, New York 2014. I think it is also worth to analyze Ferraris, Maurizio, “La presa della battaglia.

firms that, if there necessarily has to be something that allows us to protect ourselves from totalitarianism, this has to be reality itself, compared to which falsifications appear as they are, and not just as possible interpretations. Back to anthropocentrism and considering this short digression, it should be clear why I am trying to support this argument: Anti-realism sees reality not so much as non-existent, but rather as human-dependent. You may think of the ‘conceptual dependence’ typical of modern philosophy, which led it to be ‘entrapped’ in the sceptical impasse badly solved by Kant’s ‘representational dependence’ (which was a source of serious problems).

3.

It takes a lot of cockiness to state that the external world depends completely on us humans; this boldness is represented by the very anthropocentrism that I am going to discuss. Let us start with dinosaurs. The connection between dinosaurs and anti-realistic anthropocentrism is properly explained by Diego Marconi in his ‘Minimal Realism’⁵. Indeed, dinosaurs have lived between the Late Triassic (which began approximately 251 million years ago) and the Late Cretaceous (sixty-five million years ago). Moreover, as far as we know, the first human beings –

Otto punti per una discussione”, in *Alfabeta2*, 24: 2012.

⁵ Marconi, Diego, “Realismo minimale”, in M. De Caro, M. Ferraris, *Bentornata Realtà: il nuovo realismo in discussione*, Einaudi, Torino 2012.

along with their ‘representational schemes’ – have appeared on Earth just in the last two hundred fifty thousand years (according to other interpretations the amount of time is twice this one, but this is of little importance in regard to my discussion). Supposing that the entire world is dependent on our representational schemes, it will appear clear that when dinosaurs existed, they didn’t exist, since the minds that would have made them exist hadn’t appeared yet: it is an obvious and quite ridiculous paradox. However, the most evident fact is that anti-realism also has the presumption of connecting the existence of certain animals – other living subjects – to the human minds that are able to conceive them, as it happens in this case.

4.

Thus, all this implies two options: either animals exist but only in relation to the human minds that conceive them, or if they do exist, they don’t have a world (Heidegger, who was, not by chance, an ‘unrestrained anti-realist’, asserted this ‘poverty in world’ of animals), since they are not in possession of the minds that make them exist. As if it were not enough, the anti-realist view is anthropocentric also because it doesn’t consider the fact that when a human being interacts with another animal (think of Derrida and his famous cat), they both interact with something that exists and is approachable by both of them, regardless of how this

something is perceived by their respective conceptual schemes⁶.

5.

Reality is human-dependent, interpretations replace facts, and these are human interpretations in any case ('human, all too human', as also Nietzsche doubted the external world). At this point, how could we match anti-realist tendencies and the philosophies that analyze the value of animality with the purpose of rehabilitating the non-human within contemporary ethics? As far as the 'classic' cases of contemporary animal ethics are concerned – I am thinking of Peter Singer or Tom Regan – there is no match, because the ontological theory underlying animal-oriented approaches is definitely a realist theory. But let us think just for a moment of Jacques Derrida and his philosophical positions: a) the assertion that 'there is nothing outside the text' in *Grammatology* and b) the almost animalist theory in his *The animal that Therefore I Am* (not to mention the seminars in his *The Beast and the Sovereign*, published posthumously). Within the same system, is it really possible to uphold a human constructivism (a document-related constructivism, in this case) of the world while stating that every animal has a world, and that, just as Derrida properly says, every animal life is an general singularity (Giorgio A-

⁶ Think of Maurizio Ferraris' *slipper experiment*, also quoted in the above mentioned *Manifesto of New Realism*.

gamben will later call it 'quodlibet') which cannot be grasped by limiting descriptive categories? Of course it is not possible to do so, but it won't be clear until the issue 'anti-realism/anthropocentrism' is tackled head on.

6.

Let us get back to the question of dinosaurs since it will turn out to be useful for a parallelism. A well-known case of anti-realism is the one represented by Emanuele Severino, even though he thinks he is a realist (while it can be shown that he is not). He asserts that everything will exist forever and nothing can be nothingness; things merely appear and disappear from the 'sphere of appearance'⁷. If we try to imagine what Severino could tell us about the question of dinosaurs, one of his possible answers could be: how do we know that dinosaurs have not appeared in the 'sphere of appearance' just when their first remains appeared (meaning when we discovered them)? But, leaving poetic language aside, what Severino doesn't know is that the 'sphere of appearance' exactly coincides with epistemology. Remember the classic distinction between ontology (what there is) and epistemology (what we know about what

⁷ Severino's theory has the purpose of contrasting Nihilism – defined as "the insanity of western world" – and is expressed in many of his works. Among the most representative, containing several formulations of this topic, one in particular has to be mentioned: Severino, Emanuele, *Essenza del nichilismo*, Adelphi, Milano 1995.

there is): it is obvious that Severino's statement is true in a certain sense, meaning that what we know about dinosaurs has actually arisen in the moment we found their remains; but the existence of dinosaurs is true, regardless of our knowledge of them. Let us now consider some more challenging parallels: the Holocaust, for instance, could have remained unknown, possibly (in fact, notwithstanding the huge amount of documents proving the opposite, some still negate such thing ever took place). If this were the case, following Severino, we could say that the Holocaust has never happened only because it never appeared in the sphere of appearance. This view leads to a form of negationism that can only be compared with Heidegger's, entailing the thought that crematoria in concentration camps were just 'traditional bread ovens' (according to the philosopher of Being and Time, being exists only when it shows up). Far from being recent, this problem forced Michael Dummett (a realist with a verificationist attitude towards the past)⁸, to withdraw many of his positions because of the ethical implication they lead to.

7.

The seriousness of this parallelism is useful to highlight the following element: probably due to the dominant role human beings have played a-

⁸ Cf. Dummett, Michael, *Truth and the Past*, Columbia University Press, New York 2003.

cross history, they are persuaded that their point of view is the only possible. For instance, according to Cartesian anti-realism, reality only deals with my own "I think": this is the very limit of anthropocentrism (it is by no chance that Descartes upheld the idea of animals as 'automatons'). Besides being subject to several counter-examples (some of them have been shown here), this position is simply false for two reasons: (1) animals too have an environment-world⁹; (2) every animal has a different perception of reality, which does not imply the complete denial of reality in itself but, on the contrary, means that there is something existing for all living beings that is then interpreted and perceived by them in different ways.

Considering the following picture:

⁹ Contrary to Heidegger's definition of the animal as "poor in world" – in Heidegger, Martin, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2001, p. 250 – it is a fact that non-human forms of life contribute to the creation of their own environment (von Uexküll, Jakob, (1985). "Environment [Umwelt] and inner world of animals." in G. M. Burghardt (Ed.), *Foundations of Comparative Ethology* (pp. 222–245). New York, NY: Van Nostrand Reinhold. (Original work published 1909), § 16). See also Darwin, Charles, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms with Observation on their Habits*, Murray, London 1881 and Caffo, Leonardo, "In the Corridors of Animal Minds", in *Journal of Animal Ethics* 4 (1): 103–108.



Picture 1 – spectrography (dog vision compared to human vision)

By referring to the colors spectrum analysis, the picture shows the way a dog and a human perceive the world. It was Jacob von Uexküll, with his work *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans*, that called into question the anthropocentric prejudice, affirming that non-human animals live in our same sense-motor space; this is the reason why he introduced the concept of *Umwelt* (environment-world). This approach has the function of ‘decentralizing the perspective’, thus allowing animal studies to step out of the cage of speciesist prejudice (i.e. prejudice related to the belonging to a given species), therefore going beyond the comparative perspective ‘better/worse’. So as to make all this possible, it is necessary to assume a realist perspective: a falsification of anti-realism tout court turns out to be indispensable.

8.

Perhaps this misunderstanding is the cause of the numerous misinterpretations of postmodernism, which was pervaded by many sorts of reality inter-

preted by humans (as in Rorty) or even made by humans (as in Lyotard). This misunderstanding has to be clarified through the new reflections about realism in order to understand that a human’s point of view is neither the only possible nor the best one, compared to other living beings’ point of view. This plurality of gazes, visions and colours is only made possible by the fact that there is something that is observed and is waiting to be filled up with ‘sense’, as Markus Gabriel maintains¹⁰.

9.

One last objection¹¹ that could be raised at this point is the following one: the fact that animals have their own way of perceiving things is not sufficient to assert that this should lead to something similar to what is referred to as ‘world’ in the debate about realism. Thus let us try to understand how this concept (the concept of ‘world’) should be explained according to those who raise this objection. Of course, this is an extremely rich concept that, besides perception, includes aspects such as language in the Cartesian sense¹², the theory of mind (pre-

¹⁰ Gabriele, Markus, “The Meaning of “existence” and the contingency of sense”, in *Speculations: A Journal of Speculative Realism* IV (2013), pp. 74 - 83.

¹¹ I thank the first of the two anonymous referees for having exhorted me to express my answer to this objection in a clearer way.

¹² It is not only about communicating, but also about using language in different situations and in the

ferably of higher-order), the ability to establish complex relations with other individuals of the same species, etc. By analyzing the concept of 'world' after having employed von Uexküll's model, we may think we are facing a contradiction, since once again we are apparently trying to reshape the concept of world on the basis of what makes our own a 'world' deserving of being called so. However, if we thought so, we would be mistaken at least for two reasons: (1) von Uexküll himself sticks to an anthropocentric position considering our species as the only one able to access the environment of other forms of life; (2) however, it's my duty to take this objection into account because unless it is accurately solved, it will undermine the foundations of the animal-oriented intent which is the reason why I am writing these pages. Firstly, I have to address a conceptual issue: the belief that the 'world' is an exclusive domain of human beings. In order to avoid listing an endless number of cases, I am going to mention just two of them that will be counterbalanced by the studies about the 'marginal cases' within the species *Homo sapiens*. If we welcome the anthropocentric definition of 'world', we will be forced to include in animals such as certain primates (who are able, for instance, to use a language) and to leave out certain humans (who lack this ability): the cases of the male bonobo Kanzi and the female gorilla Koko are emblematic. These two animals have been able,

most varied ways: these are all abilities that animals do not possess, according to Descartes.

although in different ways¹³, to acquire languages that are as complex as ours; they also reveal to have a high-ordered theory of mind as well as the ability of establishing complex relations with other individuals, whether or not they belong to their own species¹⁴. Thus, paradoxically, if we put Koko and Kanzi into the 'world' category, we should consequently leave some humans out of it – think for instance of people affected by autism: according to some theories, highly discussed in literature¹⁵, they lack a theory of mind that allows them to attribute mental states to other people, thus compromising their sociality. At this point, the question to be asked is if we really want to prevent certain human beings from having a world, only because we have decided – in theory and arbitrarily – what a world should be like by following the most

¹³ Koko has learned a variation of the American Sign Language (ASL), now called Gorilla Sign Language (GSL): sign languages are equivalent to any other human natural language. Kanzi expresses himself through the use of a complex lexical board that he himself has asked to enlarge, so as to increase his expressive power. See respectively Patterson, Francine, and Linden, Eugene, *The Education of Koko*. Holt Rinehart & Winston, California 1981 and Rumbaugh, Sue Savage and Lewin, Roger, *Kanzi: The Ape at the Brink of Human Mind*. Doubleday, London 1994.

¹⁴ Koko has established a relation with a kitten, which is similar to our relations of domestication: Patterson, Francine, *Koko's kitten*, Scholastic Press, New York 1987.

¹⁵ See the classic study published in *Cognition* in 1985: Baron-Cohen S, Leslie AM, Frith U, "Does the autistic child have a 'theory of mind'?", *Cognition* 2 (1: 1985): 37-46.

part of individuals belonging to our own species. In order to strictly weaken the aim of such an objection, it would be sufficient to formulate this thought: what would happen if cheetahs decided what can be considered 'world' by imposing the ability of running incredibly fast as a prerogative¹⁶? This question would be enough to understand that most of human mental constructions are plainly relative. So to sum up, even the world, as it is intended in most cases within ontological debates about Realism, seems to be a social object rather than a natural object.

10.

A supplementary in-depth analysis should be carried out regarding the reason why a (non-anthropocentric) ethics opened to the non-human¹⁷ should be preferred. If anthropocentrism

¹⁶ The anthropocentric game of this objection could be played on *ad infinitum*: since cheetahs do not decide what the world is but we do, it seems like we have a world whereas animals have not. Once again we are using the human view of 'world' as a criterion to affirm that only the species *Homo sapiens* has a world, thus generating the same problem shown in the case of the use of a language, the existence of a mental life, etc.

¹⁷ Also in this case I am thankful to the referees. As an explication, I refer the reader to a more accurate analysis in Caffo, Leonardo *Only for Them: A Manifesto for Animality through Philosophy and Politics*, with a foreword by M. Calarco and an afterword by M. Joy, Mimesis International, London 2014]

were not a philosophical issue, would one be interested in pointing out that metaphysical anti-realism involves anthropocentric views? Of course anthropocentrism has been considered to be a philosophical issue through the course of the history of thinking (think of Foucault, Deleuze, Agamben, Derrida, etc.). A list of authors is not sufficient, therefore I am going to explain the in-depth analysis at issue in two points of articulation:

a) The connection between anti-realism and anthropocentrism is an ethical issue in the sense of 'scientific ethics': it completely misrepresents the effectiveness of our ontological theories;

b) The connection between anti-realism and anthropocentrism is an ethical issue in the strict sense of the word: indeed it is possible to demonstrate the falseness of an ethics which is not opened to the non-human, not only because it doesn't allow us to consider the moral status of animals (direct approach), but because it represents a danger within the 'circle' of human morality as well (indirect approach);

Being nothing more than a mere corollary to the intent of these pages, my discussion about the points at issue will be concise. Starting with point (1): from a scientific point of view, there are ethical issues in not considering antirealism's anthropological drift; this should be a logical consequence of the concepts exposed here. Talking about reality only in the terms of a particular form of life (human life, in this case) would lead to a double mistake: the first one would be

surrendering to the above-mentioned fallacy between epistemology and ontology underlined by Ferraris; the second one would be confusing one single manner of ‘epistemologizing’ with the whole of ontology. This would be a sort of internal fallacy, even more serious than the one pointed out by Ferraris: a fallacy implying that anthropocentrism (in the sense of considering humans to be the centre of the world, also from a gnoseological point of view) compromises our philosophical results at a more general level – whereas, on the contrary, realism implies a non-anthropocentrism (although it is often left implicit). If we assume that reality exists, independently from the way it is interpreted by this or that hermeneutics, we are stating that different forms of life draw different worlds – but they do so on the basis of a common canvas, which is similar to Hilary Putnam’s ‘cookie cutter’ metaphor (a cookie cutter that can be used by non-human animals too). As far as point (2) is concerned, the discussion gets more complicated: in 1975, it was Peter Singer, in his *Animal Liberation*, that showed for the first time the problems caused by an anthropocentric ethics. Being a moral model limited to the species *Homo sapiens*, it is guilty of all the violence that non-human animals are subjected to: from dying in slaughterhouses to being exploited in circuses and zoos. As shown in the previous paragraph, feelings and abilities such as pain, cognition and language do not belong to humans only: these arguments have allowed us to extend moral consideration far beyond our own species, although it only happens in moral philo-

sophy. I do not have the space to demonstrate why a non-anthropocentric ethics, carrying out valid and well-grounded arguments, is better than an anthropocentric one. It is enough for me to assume here, along with contemporary literature, that ‘speciesist’ ethics are a source of problems, since they are limited to the moral circle of our own species. If that is true, another problem has to be ascribed to anti-realism in this sense, since it leads to consider human beings as the only form of life having a world. Based on this theory, ethics excludes human beings who lack a world of moral consideration, thus causing problems within our own species as well – think of people with autism: assuming that they are ‘poor in world’, they would be banished from morals just as it happens in the case of non-human animals¹⁸. I hope anti-realism is not willing to take such a risk.

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¹⁸ An anthropocentric meta-ethical theory – as the one concerning Contractualism as it is intended by Rawls – has indeed presented some problems regarding the moral consideration of humans with disabilities that prevent them from participating in the formulation of the social contract during the suspension of particular worlds through the veil of ignorance.

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