

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Radical Realism: Direct Knowing in Science and Philosophy by Edward
Pols

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POLS, Edward. *Radical Realism: Direct Knowing in Science and Philosophy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992. xi + 221 pp. \$28.50—The main thesis of this book is one which the author acknowledges to be scandalous in the eyes of many contemporary philosophers: our rationality has the capacity to achieve *direct* knowledge of independent reality. This thesis implies a critique of what Pols calls the “linguistic consensus,” according to which all human knowledge is mediated by “language-cum-theory.” More importantly, this thesis subserves Pols’ constructive purpose in this book: to draw attention to our direct rational awareness of independent reality, and to develop some important epistemological and metaphysical implications of such awareness.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to clarifying some preliminary issues surrounding “the scandal of radical realism.” According to Pols, only heightened attention to our rational awareness—and not some new theory or proposition about it—can lead to a justification of its authenticity. Such heightened attention is nothing other than an intensification of the reflexive component which already accompanies our rational awareness of any object. The failure to attend to this rational awareness is one of the deleterious consequences of contemporary philosophy’s overvalorization of the propositional. Such overvalorization, in turn, is bound up with the failure to distinguish clearly between rational awareness itself (by which we achieve direct knowledge of objects) and the formative function of rationality (by which reason creates its own products such as theories and propositions).

In chapter 3 Pols outlines what he calls “seven dogmas of the linguistic consensus,” for example, the dogma that “knowledge consists of a system of propositions” (p. 60). In chapter 4, Pols seeks to show that there can be no satisfactory solution to the contemporary debate between realism and antirealism as long as this debate is conducted within the venue of the linguistic consensus. As Pols forcefully argues, both sides of the debate subscribe simultaneously to a minimal realism and a minimal antirealism. The debate presupposes a minimal realism insofar as both sides admit that science, if it is to remain “empirical,” must have some connection with what is nonlinguistic or nontheoretic. But the debate also presupposes a minimal antirealism insofar as both sides hold that we can have no direct knowledge of independent reality (although they disagree on whether our putatively indirect knowledge can ever be knowledge of what is independently real).

Turning to the positive purpose of his book in chapter 5, Pols distinguishes between primary rational awareness (by which we are directly aware of temporospatial beings) and secondary rational awareness (by which we are directly aware of things that are not temporospatial, such as theories and propositions). Pols’ radical realism does not entail that *all* of our knowledge must be direct. But for Pols, our indirect knowledge (for example, of the structure of the DNA molecule) would be impossible if we could not have direct knowledge of things like models and theories. The contrast between directness and indirectness is not a contrast between the experiential and rational elements of our knowing; it is a contrast between knowing something by virtue of attending to *it*, and knowing something by virtue of attending to something else.

Pols clarifies some of his conclusions in chapter 6, by articulating his "Nine Theses About Science, Common Sense, and First Philosophy." Finally, in chapter 7, Pols argues that the traditional metaphysical issues of causality and primary being (or substance) are really one. The "ontic power" of a primary being causes the being to be a unity and thus causes the beings within that being to be components of it. By virtue of its ontic power, a primary being also possesses "transeunt causality," or the power to act upon beings other than itself. Thus our direct rational awareness of primary beings as beings coincides with our direct rational awareness of their transeunt causality.

The main thesis of this book is apparently simple and straightforward, but a genuine grasp of the author's meaning requires great care and attention. This is because the book's subject matter (rational awareness) is inevitably *sui generis* and self-justifying: no amount of explanation or argumentation can eliminate the need to attend to one's own rational awareness. As Pols repeatedly points out, the contemporary failure of such self-knowledge is ultimately the failure of philosophy itself.—Michael Baur, *The Catholic University of America*.

POSSENTI, Vittorio. *Le società liberali al bivio: Lineamenti di filosofia della società*. Collana di Filosofia, 50. Turin: Marietti, 1991. 424 pp. 60,000 Italian Lire (\$45)—This is the latest book of Vittorio Possenti, professor of history of moral philosophy at the University of Venice and one of the major experts on the thought of Jacques Maritain. Possenti deals here with the situation of liberal Western societies from the point of view of classical political philosophy, understood as the tradition of political thought originating in Aristotle and adopted by Aquinas and modern Thomists such as Jacques Maritain.

The book is divided in three parts, followed by a concluding chapter. The first part deals with the theory of the political form and the problem of a public philosophy. For Possenti there are four coefficients which constitute the political form: right (natural right), common good, people, and authority. These four coefficients or components of the "politico" (*le politique, das Politischen*) are equally necessary; no political society is conceivable without any one of them, though they do not exercise the same function in the political whole. Possenti suggests an analogy, borrowed from the Aristotelian classical distinction of four causes, to explain them. The common good functions as a final cause, the right (or justice) as a formal cause; people or society as a material cause, and authority (and in the democratic regimes the people too, through its representatives) as an efficient cause (p. 39).

The importance of a defense of a theory of a natural right arises out of an idea of justice which always transcends any possible established order. By reference to this idea we are able to judge this order. On this account authority finds its justification in the order of justice, and not in the justice of order. The collapse of natural right and justice provokes the abandonment of the axiom, *iussum quia iustum* for the