FROM PARMENIDEAN IDENTITY TO BEYOND CLASSICAL IDEALISM AND EPISTEMIC CONSTRUCTIVISM

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Rockmore's paper offers a nice discussion on how classical German idealism provides a plausible account of the Parmenidean insight that thought and being are identical and suggests that idealist epistemic constructivism is arguably the most promising approach to cognition. In this short commentary, I will explore the implications of adopting other interpretations of Parmenidean identity thesis, which arguably lead to different conclusions than the ones drawn by Rockmore. En route to disavow the distinction between ontology and epistemology, I argue that one may adopt an approach on cognition which would be immunized to worries that prompt Rockmore's elaboration and also embrace (at least) some of its benefits.
Key words: identity, Parmenid, epistemic constructivism, idealism, cognition.

ОТ ПАРМЕНИДОВСКОГО ТОЖДЕСТВА — ЗА ПРЕДЕЛЫ КЛАССИЧЕСКОГО ИДЕАЛИЗМА И ЭПИСТЕМИЧЕСКОГО КОНСТРУКТИВИЗМА

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Том Рокмор представил блистательный анализ того, как немецкий идеализм использует идею Парменида о тождестве бытия и мышления. Рокмор полагает, что эпистемический конструктивизм, которого придерживались идеалисты, является перспективным подходом к познанию. В своем кратком комментарии я постараюсь рассмотреть следствия из других интерпретаций парменидовской идеи тождества, которые, вероятно, могут приводить к другим выводам. Я полагаю, что, дезавуируя различие между онтологией и эпистемологией, можно преобразовать подход к проблеме познания так, чтобы в нем не только компенсировались недостатки, но и обнаруживались преимущества концепции, предложенной Томом Рокмором.
Ключевые слова: тождество, Парменид, эпистемический конструктивизм, идеализм, познание.

Introduction

One of the most epistemologically significant questions is if, starting from our ideas, we can attain knowledge of reality. Realistic doctrines affirm that a positive answer should be given to this question, whereas idealists affirm that it is impossible to transcend the realm of our ideas to find out what reality is really like.

The realistic attitude is grounded on the view (or, if one prefers, the presupposition) that 'reality' exists independently of our knowledge. In particular, the two main tenets of metaphysical realism — as Rockmore characterizes it — are an ontological one, according to which reality exists in itself and is independent of our
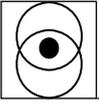
knowledge of it and an epistemological one, according to which we are able to know what reality is like.

On the contrary, the idealistic attitude implies an ontological dependence of things on our ideas. Berkeley's subjective idealism was grounded on this conception. The transcendental idealism of Fichte (as a version of subjective idealism), Schelling and Hegel (as versions of objective idealism) was grounded on the ontological identity of reality and thought; in this sense, reality is, according to them, reduced to thought. However, in Schelling and Hegel, this identity is about the way in which given worldly things are being present in our cognitive capacities, whereas they are not produced by them. Therefore, it could be argued that identity presupposes an ontological distinction between the content of our ideas and the worldly objects which are represented in them.

Rockmore's paper offers a wonderful and thought-provoking discussion on how classical German idealism provides a plausible account of the Parmenidean insight that thought and being are identical and suggests that idealist epistemic constructivism is arguably the most promising approach to cognition. He further contrasts epistemic constructivism to metaphysical realism, the main argument against which is that its main tenet that there is a mind-independent external world has never been demonstrated. However, one could counterargue that the same holds for epistemic constructivism.

In this short commentary, I will explore the implications of adopting several interpretations of Parmenidean identity thesis, which arguably lead to different than the ones drawn by Rockmore conclusions. Moreover, I circumscribe an approach to cognition based on the knowability of the mind-independent external world, which would arguably be immunized to worries that touch off Rockmore's argumentation. Such an approach could incorporate at least some of the advantages of epistemic constructivism, for which Rockmore argues.

In order to do this, I attempt a different than Rockmore's reconstruction of several episodes of the history of philosophy, aiming to highlight some interesting interrelations.

Parmenidean identity thesis: Alternative interpretations

It is interesting for my purposes to shortly discuss some interpretations of Parmenidean identity thesis which differ from the one adopted by Rockmore.

In its most radical interpretation, it follows from identity of being and thinking that nothing additional can exist. In this line of reasoning, Parmenidean identity thesis is a claim that being is reduced to thought; in other words, that nothing exists except thought.
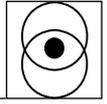
However, other interpretations radically differ from the aforementioned one. For example, Burnyeat attributes to Parmenides the view that thought refers to being: *"it is one and the same thing which is there for us to think of and is there to be: thought requires an object, distinct from itself, and that object, Parmenides argues, must actually exist"* [Burnyeat, 2012: 255]. Such an interpretation, as Rockmore discusses, suggests that cognition requires, an ontological distinction between the cognitive subject and object as well as a cognitive identity between the subject that knows and the object that is known.

Moreover, Burnet claims that *"Parmenides is not, as some have said, the 'father of idealism'; on the contrary, all materialism depends on his view of reality"* [Burnet, 1930: 182]. It turns that Parmenides' monism and his identity thesis should be jointly discussed in any venture to trace Parmenides' impact on the history of philosophical controversies about the nature and the scope of human cognition. As Kahn states *"Parmenides' monism ... had an important development in ancient and medieval philosophy and signi?cant parallels in modern monism since Spinoza and Hegel. The identi?cation of Mind and Being; that is, of cognition with its object"* [Kahn, 2009: 163].

In another interpretation, Parmenidean identity thesis is not primarily as a thesis concerning being, but as one concerning knowing. In this sense, it states that when knowing occurs, being and thinking become one and, then, experience is as much objective as subjective. In Kahn's words *"[t]he 'is' which Parmenides proclaims is not primarily existential but veridical: it asserts not only the reality but the determinate being- so of the knowable object, as the ontological 'content' or correlate of true statement"* [Kahn, 2009: 155]. In this sense, it is the thinking that is reduced to being and not vice versa: *"the mind does not impose its forms but receives them from the object it knows"* (Kahn, 2009: 166). Such an understanding would be equally at home in both Plato and Hegel.

It seems, then, that Parmenidean identity thesis could be read as if it points to both an objectivist and a subjectivist stance and it is an open question which one of them is to be adopted. In Hegel's understanding of Parmenides' identity thesis, since there is nothing other than Being, *thinking is identical with its Being, for there is nothing other than Being"* [Hegel, 1970: 289–90]. Thus, Parmenides' indeterminate being serves as Hegel's starting point for systematic thinking in general. In Hegel's line of reasoning, thinking starts necessarily from being (as Parmenides argues), and therefore the *"indeterminate Being"* cannot be determined by and for thinking. On the contrary, Fichte argues that *"self-consciousness is the identity of thinking and being"* [Fichte, 1992: 382 n.] and Heidegger affirms that *"because thinking remains a subjective activity, and thinking and Being are supposed to be the same according to Parmenides, everything becomes subjective. There are no beings in themselves. But such a doctrine, so the story goes, can be found in Kant and German Idealism. Parmenides already basically anticipated their doctrines"* [Heidegger, 2000: 14].
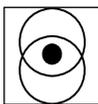
Representationalist accounts of knowledge

I contend that the issue under discussion is closely linked to a certain understanding of the representational content of our cognitive claims, according to which cognitive claims confer knowledge because and as long as they constitute accurate representations of the external world. The view that cognitive claims successfully capture features of the world is affiliated with any variety of realism and Rockmore offers a nice and historically informed discussion of the issue.

The roots of representationalist accounts on knowledge may be traced back to Locke. According to these accounts, we cannot have direct acquaintance with objects of knowledge; they can be approached only via ideas, which represent them. In other words, what we immediately know is our representations or ideas, not reality itself. Hence, proponents of such accounts conceive knowledge as congregation of representations which are arguably accurate reproductions of external reality and this is why they can stand truthfully for them. In other words, the external world is not directly presented to the consciousness. The content of our thoughts and knowledge consists of a collection of internal representations of some kind. Thus knowledge is identified with internal representation.

The main difficulty for such views is that they cannot provide justification of the ideas that we are supposed to formulate via representation by any other means than our ideas themselves, since our consciousness is supposed not to have direct access to the things (broadly construed) which are represented by our ideas. In other words, they have to give an account on the relationship between internal and external representations. For that purpose, one would need to know what internal representations are like and how they are connected to external representations of the world or the world itself.

This problem has survived for a long time since then, as a feature of the doctrines deployed by several philosophers throughout history. Among them, Kant is a commanding figure. On this road, epistemology was given birth. Man's limited capacity to know how things are turned into a condition of empirical knowledge; one has to explain how things can be given to representation. In the Kantian line of philosophical doctrines, knowledge is understood in terms of the relation between the objective knowledge *substrata*, offered by the world, and the cognitive skills of the subject.

Kant transformed the unresolved scientific problem of the relation of sensations to their objects into a question about the possibility of knowledge. This question was to be resolved in the sphere of representation. It should be noted that Kant maintains, with regard to the ontological aspect of the issue, that inner thoughts prove the existence of the external world.

Rorty notes that "*the Kantian picture of concepts and intuitions getting together to produce knowledge is needed to give sense to the idea of 'theory*
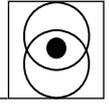
of knowledge' as a special philosophical discipline" [Rorty, 1979: 168]. Rorty himself started his anti-representationalist and anti-epistemological campaign from this point. He urges us to stop thinking of knowledge in terms of representing accurately that what is outside the mind. He maintains that grasping the world in itself amounts to platonism (a form of metaphysical realism, according to Rockmore). On the contrary, Rorty suggests that it could only be grasped philosophically, within time and history.

Hacking, among others, contests the role of representations as truth-hunters and pleas for a non-representationalist view of science, putting emphasis on experimentation and material agency. In fact, Hacking contests the very notion of reality as it is commonly understood and favors a view of it as a fictitious construction, by arguing that it is second-order concept that follows from our practice of representation: *"The world has an excellent place, even if not the first one…It was found by conceptualizing the real as an attribute of representations"* [Hacking, 1983: 136]. This attitude is pretty close to the one defended by Rockmore.

In this line of reasoning, epistemological problems arise due to the assumption that, in order to give us knowledge of the world, our representations have to be more or less accurate or truthful reflections of it. It could be argued that a way-out of this problem is to state that representations are not meant to represent the world as it is. In this line of reasoning, our representational vehicles create effects that our cognition is unlikely to essentially capture from reality, since there is nothing to capture, once objectivity and, arguably, mind-independency of the objects of knowledge are undermined. Therefore, in line with these views, objects of cognition could be conceived of as constructions whose existence is relative. Such a view could be regarded as a radical version of Rockmore's epistemic constructivism.

Representationalism, epistemic constructivism and pragmatism

In contradistinction with representationalist accounts, it has been argued that trust in cognitive claims is an empirical and/or contextual issue. Under this prism, one could see Rockmore's epistemic constructivism and also pragmatic approaches. In both epistemic constructivism and pragmatism, non-epistemic values are taken into account as contributors to cognitive success and, thus, the realistic attitude according to which our cognitive claims are rendered true by the existence of facts with corresponding elements and similar structures is surmounted.

From this point of view, I would like to shortly comment on Rockmore's reference to Brandom as an example of a modern thinker who adopts the view that we can and in fact do cognize the mind independent world as it is, appealing to the affinity of his views to the early Wittgenstein's view that language hooks up with the world. However, I maintain that this is only the one side of the coin.
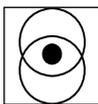
Brandom is mostly influenced by Rorty's pragmatism, while being critical to classical pragmatists. His pragmatic concerns are deployed in his version of inferential semantics, by which he contests the representationalist idea that the function of thought and language is to provide a transcript of reality. In this context, words like 'true' and utterances like 'refers to' are not transcriptions of any indigenous in the domain of reality content. Following Rorty, Brandom rejects that one could provide accurate representations of the surroundings of the inquiry. It is not of any significance or interest whether one or the other way of talking is an accurate description of the surroundings. Ways of talking should and could not be evaluated in terms of accuracy; the virtues of the practices that are involved in their usage suffice for their evaluation.

Brandom argues that the essence of pragmatism is the denial that semantics is conceptually autonomous from pragmatics. He claims that *"it is pointless to attribute semantic structure or content that does no pragmatic explanatory work"* [Brandom, 1994: 144]. Along these lines, one could also discuss Dummett's denial that one can grasp content which goes beyond anything that could be veri?ed or Quine's denial that there is any objective grounds for choosing between competing translation manuals that make the same predictions upon patterns of use. From this perspective, Brandom's line of reasoning could also be seen as being as close to epistemic constructivism.

Reconstructing representation

I argue that one can embrace the motivation behind epistemic constructivism (and pragmatism), without adopting either of them as a stance, on the grounds of a reconstruction of our conception of representation in a way which pays due attention to the aforementioned criticisms.

In the epistemological context I endorse, human social practice is the departing point of our cognitive activities: knowledge is not *causa sui*, its content is objective and our representations of reality can grasp its features because they are reconstructions of the systems we gain cognitive access to by the means of the artifacts employed in our theoretical inquiries. The process of cognition is active interference in objective reality by the means of our cognitive artifacts, sign-systems and conceptual frameworks. These representing artifacts functions as surrogates in activity performed throughout our inquiries, by piloting our intervention with the objects of cognition which they are meant to represent.

In these lines, to know means to manipulate the object of knowledge, to transform it into a tool of action. An object becomes a specific object of cognition, acquires its specific meaning and unveils previously unrecognized aspects of its existence within its interaction with the cognizing subject, the human-agent [Azeri, 2013: 1122]. Therefore, cognition is always
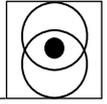
about nature humanized by activity and its object exists objectively in the course of the process of its ideal reproduction in thought.

In order to shed more light on this view, let me shortly discuss Marx Wartofsky's views on the role of representation in cognition. Wartofsky was the only Marxist among the pioneers (i.e. Toulmin, Russell Hanson, Feyerabend, Kuhn) in the movement to integrate the history of science with the philosophy of science. As anyone would expect from a literate Marxist, Wartofsky puts emphasis on practice, rejects the traditional Kantian-rooted conception of representation, uses tool-metaphors as opposed to vision-metaphors, puts emphasis on the concrete use of models in scientific work and focuses on change rather than stability. An important feature of his views is that he had a considered balance between the conceptual changes in science and the demand for some sense of direction and improvement in the succession of scientific theories. I maintain that Wartofsky's contribution goes beyond these aspects and could be suggestive for our discussion.

In his *historical epistemology*, Wartofsky, considering knowledge as being itself the subject of historical evolution, maintains that the crucial factor of human cognitive practice is the ability to make representations. Human beings, when producing an artifact, are at the same producing a representation, since these artifacts do not only have a use, but also represent the mode of action in which they are used or the mode of their own production [Wartofsky, 1979: xiii].

Wartofsky underlines that this discussion about representation imputes an epistemology in which the knowing subject confronts a surrogate object of knowledge as a representation of the external world. Moreover, he persists that the emphasis should be shifted from what representation is to the activity of representing. He is clearly distant from views that consider representation to be a case of denotation. According to him, representation essentially involves reference and meaning, thus reference is a constitutive aspect of representation, while referring is also construed as an intentional activity [Wartofsky, 1979: xxi]). One should not defy that this entails that models are truth-hunters, since they purport reference and reference purports truth and falsity [Wartofsky, 1966/1979: 10].

Wartofsky insists on the realism of his thesis, since he maintains that, in our representations, the represented objects, events or processes, are represented *as* material objects, events or processes *of a material world* [Wartofsky, 1966/1979: 1] – my emphasis). The representations he is talking about are in fact derivatives, generated by our own activity of representing, in which we take the represented physical objects as representations. He further claims that our making of representations is the actual praxis of creating concrete, worldly objects, as representations [Wartofsky, 1979: xxii]. This is the point, where I think that an approach along these lines could arguably embrace some of the benefits of adopting epistemic constructivism, as they are presented by Rockmore.
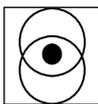
Vico and Marx

In order to address the previous point in some detail, I would now turn to some of Vico's views[1], to whom Rockmore also appeals.

One of the most important and characteristic features of Vico's thinking is his discredit of the Cartesian-positivistic approach to knowledge. He elaborated and suggested a system of thought, based on the *verum-factum* principle, aiming to propose an alternative to Cartesianism. According to the *verum-factum* principle we (human beings) can only know what we ourselves have made or are in principle capable of making:

> *"But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men and its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our human mind"* [Vico, 2002: 96].

Vico maintains that the way into the world of nature lies through the human world. He accounts for the process through which man's entire world (including the several conceptions of reality) develops and is structured. Vico accounts for an understanding of mind in all its complexity and he grounds there a genetic understanding of the human world. He sees human labor as the foundation of the transformation of nature in such a way that it becomes the means by which man, learning the meaning of change and time, both creates and understands history. In this sense, Vico offers an integrating vision of man and culture. Vico's hermeneutics directs attention to the role of critical interpretation in understanding not only the humanities but also the natural sciences, which are both considered as constructions of the human mind.

Toulmin (one of the philosophers who shared with Wartofsky the aspiration to integrate the history of science with the philosophy of science), who is arguably strongly affected by Vichian ideas, states:

> *"The hermeneutic movement in philosophy and criticism has done us a service by directing attention to the role of critical interpretation in understanding the humanities. But it has done us a disservice also because it does not recognize any comparable role for the interpretation in the natural sciences and in this way sharply separates the two fields of scholarship and experience* (…) *The general categories of hermeneutics can be applied as well to the natural sciences as to the humanities* (…) *The natural sciences too are in the business of 'construing reality'"* [Toulmin, 1982].

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[1] For a further discussion of Vico's view, from the perspective that concerns me here, see Tagliacozzo (1983), which is my main reference in this section.
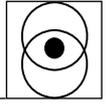
One could simply add a "-ct-" so that the last sentence reads '*the natural sciences too are in the business of 'construCTing reality',* and thus it would embrace the core idea of epistemic constructivism, as it is discussed by Rockmore.

Comparing Marx and Vico brings forth several similarities in their line of reasoning. They both maintain that surface events and phenomena are to be explained by structures, data and phenomena below the surface. They also share the contention that the explicit and the obvious is to be explained by what is implicit and not obvious. Moreover, the view that understanding human action and ideas requires an analysis of their social context is shared by both of them. It is also so for the view that human knowledge of the world emerges out of an interaction of the social subject and the object etc. Both Vico and Marx reject traditional metaphysics. However, they do so in quite different ways. Vico rejects the metaphysical view that deduces reality from a first truth, according to the scheme of Cartesianism. On the other hand, Marx rejects Hegelian idealism, which dialectically deduces reality and historicity a priori [cf. Tagliacozzo, 1983].

Since Rockmore convincingly argues for the vicinity of Hegel's and Vico's lines of reasoning — at least with regard to the aspects of interest for our discussion — I propose that, in a quest of an alternative to epistemic constructivism, one could focus on these points that distinguish Marx's thinking from Hegel's.

Marx understands knowledge as the appropriation of objective reality, as its reproduction in thought in an ideal form. The real concrete is cognitively appropriated via the mediation of abstraction. Human beings construct their mental representations of reality on the basis of concrete social practice, which is ultimately grounded on objectively imposed social necessities. Since abstraction is employed, in the course of our cognitive inquiries we reconstruct reality in an ideal form, which in turn is realizable in actuality.

Ilyenkovian insights on identity

E.V. Ilyenkov encounters with the traditional epistemological question of the interrelations of thought and being in his *Dialectical Logic* [Ilyenkov, 1977], in which he runs the history of the conception of the ideal in philosophy and investigates how this question is posed and answered by the great philosophers of the past.

According to Ilyenkov, in any version of idealistic monism (i.e. in Schelling and Hegel), which, as it has been discussed, is arguably related to Parmenidean identity, Thus, the unfilled gap between thought and being outside thought was surmounted by the identity of thinking in itself. In fact, as Ilyenkov notes, Schelling and Hegel do not establish any identity of thought and being, because they do not take into account 'being as such' – free independent self-sufficient being existing outside and independently
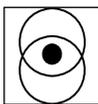
of thought [Ilyenkov, 1977: 212]. According to Ilyenkov, from the materialist point of view, the principle of the identity of the laws and forms of thought and being states that *"logical forms and patterns are nothing else than* realised universal forms and patterns of being*, of the real world sensuously given to man"* [Ilyenkov, 1977: 222].

The conclusion that Ilyenkov draws is that the seeming gap between consciousness and the real world becomes bridged, because, actually, there was never any gap [Knuuttila, 2000: 197]. It is human social labour that makes such a bridge useless, since it is the source of objectification of the ideal. Therefore, not only is the ideal independent from the mental for its existence, but the mental itself is social in its origin. Consciousness is awakening, as the individual is confronted by the materially established spiritual culture of the humanity [Ilyenkov, 1977: 81].

According to Ilyenkov, the fundamental forms of thought are not given a priori but are realized historically as social consciousness and thought is not embodied in utterances of language, but in the results of human activity. Ilyenkov contends that thought is realized in culture and in the humanized environment, in what Marx called the "*inorganic body of man*". Mindedness of individuals is not given, but emerges through the appropriation of those modes of thought that are embodied in the practice of the community constitutive of social consciousness and all modes of mindedness are penetrated by conceptuality. As also McDowell argues, there is no gap between mind and the world inherent in the very idea of thought, therefore thought can be at one with the world [McDowell, 1994: 27]. As Bakhurst analyzes, in Ilyenkov the objectification of human activity is considered to be the source of the nature and possibility of thought and thought is the means by which the world is, or at least can be, disclosed to us [Bakhurst, 2013: 280]. Ergo, thought is able to embrace reality as it is.

Envoi

While the Parmenidian identity can be built upon in order to offer epistemic constructivism as an approach to cognition which radically differs from and opposes to metaphysical realism, as Rockmore aptly discusses, alternative interpretations may offer alternative approaches to cognition. En route to disavow the distinction between ontology and epistemology, the discussion thus far points to that any ontological theory presupposes an epistemological theory. Thus, ontological and epistemological concerns merge in one and the same magnifying lens which is employed in our inquiries.

On these grounds, I have tried to argue that if one is inclined to assert both that the world is populated by cognizable objects of any kind and that our attempts to describe and explain the world are fallible, s/he is not obliged to adopt any variety of metaphysical realism – and the burden which arguably comes with it. In such a line of reasoning, knowledge of the seve-

ral worldly parts and processes is open to critique and susceptible of replacement of the employed set of categories and relationships between them[2] . Such an understanding – which is only roughly formulated here – is arguably capitulating between the merits of metaphysical realism and epistemic constructivism, as Rockmore discusses them.
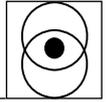
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[2] This may seem as a version of critical realism. However, in this paper, I do not mean to argue either for or against critical realism as a stance in general. It suffices for my current purposes to show that there are alternatives to Rockmore's idealistic constructivism that can be accounted for by starting from an elaboration on Parmenidean identity. Lektorski (2015) is another interesting attempt, from a different perspective, to reconcile constructivist and realist positions in epistemology by proposing the position of the constructive realism.
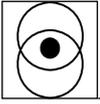
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