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Luis M. Augusto. (2005). *Who's afraid of idealism? Epistemological idealism from the Kantian and Nietzschean points of view.* Lanham, MD : University Press of America.

Preface

Although I start this book with an example of the practical applications of idealism, I intend it to be mainly about epistemological idealism, the basis for all other sorts of idealisms. And this for the following reasons: the first reason is that my present research in philosophy is mostly centered in epistemology; secondly, and more importantly, I find it more effective to address practical matters, namely political and social issues, in more literary forms than in a philosophical language and style. After all, political doctrines, for instance, can only achieve victory or be defeated via political “literature” and, ultimately, praxis; at least, until philosophical literature is more widely consumed than at present.

Still another very good reason is that there are books on political, aesthetic, ethical, etc, idealism by the hundreds, but the same does not happen with epistemological idealism, commonly considered far more abstruse and uninteresting than other forms of the *ism*. Believe me, it may be abstruse, but it is not uninteresting, not the least.

The wrong ideas just mentioned are due to the widespread belief that epistemology is *the* most serious and difficult field of philosophy. Well, it certainly is not very easy, at least at first, but mostly because it is rather “knotty.” There is also the idea that the most highbrow philosophers worked in this field, which might be true. But a name like that of Kant should not—unjustifiably—discourage many people; and epistemology cannot be that highbrow if Nietzsche messed with it in a fruitful way. That is one of the main reasons why I decided to approach the complexity of epistemological idealism starting from the viewpoints of these two philosophers at first sight so different from each other, but who had one thing in common: they were both very much afraid of it. If epistemology is primarily concerned with truth, these two major figures of Western thought were very much afraid of epistemological idealism precisely because it may provide a “false truth,” as Kant feared, or insist on a single Truth, which Nietzsche dreaded. This book is about the intense and complex dialogues that these two philosophers originated inside Western philosophy around the problem of idealism and, consequently, truth.

There are, of course, my more personal reasons to write about idealism via these two particular philosophers: as for Kant’s epistemology, I see it as, if not the most achieved, at least very probably the most revolutionary one up till today. On the other hand, and because I defend—sometimes in spite of myself—a very broad meaning to the word “philosophy,” I believe that the provocative “epistemology” of Nietzsche is essential to an understanding of contemporary

epistemology. Moreover, if Kant represents the kind of rigor in analysis that I defend, Nietzsche greatly appeals to my sense of philosophical unorthodoxy.

Last but not least: why idealism? Contradicting the main contemporary trend, I shall answer by saying that it is inevitable. Despite centuries of tremendous efforts, we still cannot prove that our knowledge of the world is precisely that: knowledge of the world; the insidious suspicion that what we actually know is mind-made by us still haunts us, and looks like it will go on haunting us for a long time to come (if not for as long as the human species is around). But if, as Kant put it, without the objects of the outer world we are no more than indeterminate subjects of thought, then we also have reasons to believe that we know some of the world. In any case, however, we are dealing with idealism. As I said, it is inevitable, and both Kant and Nietzsche, better than anyone else, knew that. And they did not like it one bit, either.

All the texts quoted in this book are in the public domain; the spelling was modernized whenever necessary. All translations of extracts of foreign texts are mine, except the ones of Spinoza's *Ethics*, which are by R.H.M. Elwes, also in the public domain.

My thanks to UPA for agreeing to publish this book.

The fellowship granted to me by the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) and by the European Social Fund allowed me to research fulltime into idealism; for this reason, too, this fellowship was invaluable.

Luis M. Augusto

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Introduction

Imagine I held up my left hand, the back towards you, and show you four fingers extended, the thumb hidden in the palm. Now, suppose I ask you how many fingers you see: four, you will very likely answer. If I ask you how you know that, the answer is obvious: they are in front of your eyes. Right. What if I decide that I am holding up three or five fingers, and not four?

What exactly is in front of our eyes? Still better: who or what decides what is in front of our eyes? Who can actually ever be sure that two and two make four? And why? Who did it that way? When did he or she do it? We all have asked ourselves these questions, with bigger or lesser amounts of philosophical anguish, with a more or less scientific spirit. It seems that there *must* be a world out there which we can all agree upon; it must be shared, public; better, it must be universal: it cannot change according to culture or geography, it must be one and the same for everybody, regardless of the language one may use to refer to it. If there is anything like reality, it must be like that. It seems that there must be something beyond you, outside you, something you can rely on; besides yourself, of course. You do, of course, know that you are, first of all.

There is obviously nothing wrong with the fact that you, first of all, know that you yourself are; the contrary would be worrying. You know that you are, and more than that, you know that you have a peculiar point of view on that reality, even if it is supposed to be universal. That means that you know you are not only an individual, but a subject: you look upon that reality from a unique perspective, and you are often aware that the others do not see the world as you do. Again, this is fundamental basic knowledge. But, somehow, you do not tend to think that reality just *is* the way you alone see it. As a matter of fact, you have probably already thought that not many things can be as frightening as the possibility that all depends on the subject, on the self: since there are individuals far more intelligent, or just stronger, more powerful, or merely more tenacious than others, certainly they could, without much effort, establish their truths and persuade or force everybody else to accept them. Thus, a “reality” at first individual and wholly subjective could end up turning into a collective “reality,” a sort of collective subjectivism. Besides, if all depends on the subject, how can one be sure that the others really exist, that one has a family and friends, that one is not actually alone somewhere in a perhaps not even physical world, in an illusory

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world, “living a phony life”? What, then, would be true, if anything? How does one know one is simply not dreaming?

But the problem is not one between a selfish solipsism and a collective subjectivism: the problem is that both solipsism and subjectivism have to be eliminated if one wants to have some peace of mind. Reality must defeat those stances; it must drive them aside as mere extravagances, children’s stuff. Reality must be non-subjective; it must be so “objective,” it can impose itself upon the subject with an inescapable weight. Truth is out there; it is not within you, regardless of your intelligent insights, creative skills, or good intentions. Actually, you do not count, in a world of things existing independently of you. And oddly enough, this indifference of reality towards you seems to bring some certainty, something in which to believe. You are a realist.

If, on the contrary, you actually think you count a lot and that the world does depend on you, namely on your mind, consciousness, or point of view, then you are an idealist and a lot of people will be afraid of you. And some will be so scared, they will try to get rid of you.

Why is that? Well, because you might decide that two and two do not make four but five; and you might want to persuade others, everybody, that it is as you say. After all, it is only true; therefore, people should accept it. If, besides your inventive capacity and enlightenment, you have some really very strong political power (you are the president of a dictatorial country or you are closely related to one), or even cultural power (you have a powerful lobby in the academe or among less highbrow multitudes who look upon you as “great”), you can decide, without the slightest meanness, that your truth is everybody else’s Truth. After all, to start with, there was no certainty before that two and two made four. Those who might disagree with you must of course be eliminated, not for your own sake, obviously, but for the sake of thousand or even million others who need your Truth. Truth, after all, like driving rules, is supposed to be universally accepted.

I am not exaggerating; George Orwell was not exaggerating when he wrote *1984*, the novel from which I borrowed the imaginary situation in the beginning of this text, and which he probably wanted should be premonitory rather than prophetic. What interests me the most in this novel is the fact that it is entirely built upon the issue of philosophical idealism. In the most crucial part of the novel, the main character, Winstow, arrested by the law enforcement agents of New Oceania, an authoritarian state, is confronted with the question of reality by his hangman. Despite his extreme brutality, O’Brien the Idealist, as I call him, is not an idiot; true idealists are rarely idiots; he is even extremely cunning, cultivated, a defender of Truth; he believes in his own Truth, the one of his Party, the one of his Government, and he believes in It as some believe in gods: only a life lived in conformity with this Truth can spare man a battle lost at start against uncertainty, against precariousness of human knowledge, and against subjectivity. Winstow believes that truth is what is in front of one’s eyes, and he is prepared to suffer a certain amount of torture to defend that truth, but O’Brien

sees things differently: truth is what you are told truth is; it is not in front of you, but in the mind. In *a Mind*.

The fact that O'Brien the Idealist has behind him a totalitarian political regime is not the most important; the most important thing is that he believes he is right. Behind him he could have a publisher, an important scholar in a university, an influential newspaper, a religious sect ready to follow him into death, but none of these are essential. The important thing is that he believes he is right; not so much in the *rightness* of the things he thinks, but in the *rightness* of convincing others that things are so for the sake of *rightness*. He is ready to do anything to achieve that end, because he believes that it is the Truth.

One of the tasks of philosophy, namely of epistemology, is precisely to try to define truth and find the sources of our true knowledge, the big question being whether they are exclusively inner ones, solely exterior, or even a combination of the two. Concurrently, our perceptive and intellective faculties are at stake: if you think that reality is mind-made, you must find evidence for the powers of the mind; on the contrary, if you believe that we can only perceive and know what is given to us from a world of objects outside us, then you must find evidence for the powers of the objects. Both tasks seem impossible to achieve, and not even the third stance, the conciliatory one, finds its task to be easier, since it has to account for the powers of both the mind and the outer objects.

So, what is truth? Where does it come from? How relativistic/universal is it? These questions have always excited (if not tormented) philosophers, and the history of philosophy is to a great extent the attempt to answer them. This made of the history of philosophy a battlefield of opposing quarters, each trying to usurp the throne of Truth, convinced that its view was *the* true one. They were trying to impose their views because they were certain that it was the best for everybody else, too. They were not (always) selfish or authoritarian, but they could not help being chagrined at the fact that other notoriously erroneous worldviews were preferred to theirs.

This history is marked by high moments, periods in which discussion reached high levels of theoretical elaboration. Unlike the sciences, which actually progress, abandoning some theories in favor of others that explain the world in a better way, philosophy cannot look upon those moments as past ones, but has to see them as actual matter of reflection. Thus, the history of philosophy is never done, since Plato's doctrine, for instance, is today still a starting point for countless philosophers, professional or, well, natural. And this is hygienic, to say the least, thus hindering the enthusiasms of teleology, such as the Hegelian one, for which the history of philosophy was the path to the realization of a perfect sublime spirit, whatever that might be. Because it has no end, philosophy is a dialogue.

The present book is the attempt to show the reader the dialogue (which can become a battlefield, undoubtedly) that these epistemological questions have originated in the history of Western philosophy. Kant and Nietzsche are not to be seen as better than any of their opponents, but merely as starting points of

this dialogue. Above all, neither any one of them nor any of their opponents is to be seen as carrier of the Truth if we want to block *rightness*.

Before starting, there are three things that I want to settle: first of all, to talk of ideas in general in Kant is, in a way, to go against him, but to follow his definition of ideas would hinder any attempt to establish a dialogue between him and other philosophers; while most philosophers conceive(d) the ideas in a very similar way—as “objects” of the mind—, Kant proposed they should be used to mean exclusively the concepts formed from notions transcending the possibility of experience (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A320/B377). Nevertheless, they are a kind of representation, and I chose to neglect his definition and use “ideas” as a synonym, in him, for “representations.” This in no way harms his definition, also because whenever the objects transcending the possibility of experience are meant, I use the expression “ideas of reason,” and thus distinguish them from representations/ideas in general.

Secondly, it is important to realize that Kant actually did not carry out *the* Copernican Revolution: if this is the attribution to the subject of the “making” of the object, then it is to Dietrich of Freiberg (13th-14th centuries) that the honor of such a revolution must be attributed. In his treatise *De intellectu et intelligibili* (*On the Intellect and the Intelligible*) he clearly stated that “the intellect in a certain way formally constitutes its own object, which is its essence, from its formal principles” (III, 25, 13), and he offered the reader a list of twelve such principles which remarkably resemble Kant’s tables of judgments and of categories. In another work, *De origine rerum praedicamentalium* (*On the Origin of the Categories of Things*), he went on to elaborate on the role of the intellect in the formation of the object. Nevertheless, Kant did not know this (as practically everybody else until very recently), and, in the context of modern philosophy, he can obviously be seen as the maker of a major revolution.

Finally, this book does not cover relatively important schools or movements of idealism, such as the Cambridge Platonists and the Anglo-American idealism (with the exception of McTaggart), and this solely for the reason that they were not direct partners in the dialogue initiated by Kant and Nietzsche.

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The entries for concepts/topics must be looked for under the main entry of the philosopher in question. Concepts or topics not directly related to any one name in particular are listed on their own. Thus, you can find two or more identical entries (eg.: space and time; Berkeley – space and time; Kant – space and time).

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