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*Nature and Thought. Some Reflections on Margolis' Claim of the Indissolubility of Realism and Idealism*

Among many other things, Margolis' new book, *Pragmatism Ascendent: A Yard of Narrative, A Touch of Prophecy*, is a successful attempt to articulate in a thoroughly naturalistic way the fundamental tenet of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy – that is, the idea that idealism and realism are not two alternative metaphysical options, but rather two ways of dealing with the very same thing, the concrete experience that human beings have of their world. One of the most characteristic errors of traditional philosophies has been that of holding apart subject and object, thus assuming either realism or idealism to be true. In the first case, the object is treated as an entity wholly independent from the cognitive activities of the subject; in the second case, the autonomy of the object is firmly denied, and the object is completely absorbed in the subject. The defect of this alternative is that it does not contemplate the possibility of a third way between these two extremes. It was Kant who had the merit of realizing that transcendental idealism and empirical realism not only can but also should be simultaneously embraced. Indeed, idealism refers to the necessary relation that knowledge entertains with the subject, while empiricism refers to the kind of validity that human knowledge possesses. So, no contradiction stems from their simultaneous assumption. Kant explains this fundamental trait of the critical philosophy by remarking that to say that space and time are transcendently ideal is only to say that they are not properties of the things-in-themselves. The recognition of their dependence upon the cognitive structures of the agent does not imply that judgments about space and time cannot be empirically assessed (Kant 1781/1787: A369-70).

Margolis follows Kant in rejecting any contraposition between the subjective and the objective. However, he considers the transcendental way that Kant has taken to be too committed to rationalistic and dualistic presumptions. Accordingly, Margolis distinguishes between Kant's constructivist approach – which represents his most valuable contribution to the philosophical discourse of the 'modernity of modernity', and consists in the recognition of the fact that objects are theory-laden – and his illegitimate belief in the possibility of singling out a set of categories that constitute experience. The commitment to a list of fixed and unchanging concepts is what he names 'transcendentalism'. Consequently, Margolis depicts the history of the post-Kantian philosophy as a series of efforts aiming at shaping a form of constructivism free from 'transcendentalist' prejudices. Referring to the heated debate on the nature of geometry that characterized nineteenth century German philosophy, Margolis finds no difficulty in showing that what Kant believed to be a necessary condition of possibility of experience – namely, the Euclidean space – was in reality a hypothesis that was wholly legitimate at a certain moment of history, but which was subsequently abandoned when the evolution of physical sciences required the creation of new tools to handle new problems. On Margolis' reading, a correct interpretation of the history of science leads therefore to the conclusion that the categories of *Vernunft* – the faculty of reason in general – are contingent, context-dependent, and

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constantly under process of revision. Far from being the immutable structures of understanding, they are products of a transient flux whose validity as principles of construction of experience is local and historical.

Plausible as this reconstruction may seem to contemporary philosophers, I think that some reservations should be advanced against Margolis' treatment of the "indissoluble union of realism and idealism" (Margolis 2012: cap 2. 54). I would like to call attention to two different, yet interrelated points that I find particularly problematic. Firstly, I cannot accept Margolis' decision to restrict the constructivist option to the analysis of what Sellars has called 'the scientific image of the world'. Margolis is rather explicit in maintaining that what he is dealing with is not the general concept of objectivity, but the particular kind of objectivity that is proper of the entities postulated in science. The constructivism that he has in mind is therefore much less radical than one could expect: the view that he wants to defend is the modest thesis that "what is constructed is one or another picture of the world" (Margolis 2012: cap. 2. 12). I think that such a restriction is not only unwarranted, but also illegitimate. In section I, I will try to show that it relies on a conception of the nature and role of thought that seems to be not completely consistent with the tenets of a pragmatist theory of knowledge.

Secondly, I am not convinced that Margolis's argument in favor of the rejection of the notion of the transcendental is really conclusive. Margolis does not always distinguish clearly between transcendental and a priori, thus implicitly assuming that the criticisms that have been directed against the latter can be extended without modification to the former. Now, no one can deny that in Kant's original formulation the two notions are essentially interwoven. Kant defines transcendental as the cognition "that is occupied [...] with our *a priori* concepts of objects in general" (Kant 1781/1787: A11-12/B25). Similarly, it is not by chance that the transcendental deduction of categories is preceded by a metaphysical deduction in which Kant attempts to derive the different ways of constructing experience from the immutable structure of understanding. So, if they are directed against the way in which Kant defines and uses the notion of the transcendental, Margolis' criticisms are undoubtedly effective. But this does not mean that a different conception cannot be developed. In section II, I will attempt to sketch the broad outlines of a different view of what transcendental philosophy may be within a thoroughly naturalistic framework. My goal is to suggest that the 'constructivist naturalism' endorsed by Margolis can make room for a transcendental analysis of the conditions of possibility of scientific experience without being compelled to accept the foundationalism that has been traditionally associated with it.

## I

One of the most relevant contributions of the book is the reading of the pragmatist tradition as a particular way of coming to term with Kant's transcendental insight. In the context of an attempt to defend his idiosyncratic interpretation of Peirce's concept of fallibilism, Margolis writes:

Let me remind you once again that, as I read the matter, "idealism" (lower-case "i") is either independent of or neutral with regard to "realism" or disjunctively opposed to "realism"; whereas "Idealism" (capital "I") is hospitable to incorporating some forms of constructive "realism" (as among the German Idealists). Furthermore, "idealism" (in the Kantian sense) holds that what is empirically "real" is actually constituted (in part at least) by what is subjective in origin and nature; whereas "Idealism" (in Peirce's best sense) is (so to say)

construed “epistemologically” (in the constructivist way) rather than “metaphysically” (disjunctively), hence is restricted to our “picture” (our constructed picture) of reality rather than addressed to the actual “constitution” of reality itself. (Margolis 2012: Chapter 2, 56)

The argument is undoubtedly well grounded. Margolis criticizes the realistic interpretation of Peirce’s theory of truth for not paying due attention to the anti-subjectivist constructivism that is implicit in the *definition* that the founder of pragmatism gives of truth as the “opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate” (Peirce 1878/1986: 273). As is well known, in *How to Make Our Ideas Clear* Peirce puts forward a thesis that may seem paradoxical. He writes: “on the one hand, reality is independent, not necessarily of thought in general, but only of what you or I or any finite number of men may think about it; [...] on the other hand, though the object of the final opinion depends on what that opinion is, yet what that opinion is does not depend on what you or I or any man thinks” (Peirce 1878/1986: 274). The air of paradox disappears when it is reminded that, after Kant, the structure of the object cannot be separated from the conceptual apparatus through which a knower understands the world. Consequently, the passage quoted above not only supports Margolis’ claim that Peirce cannot be read as a pre-Kantian realist, but also allows him to conclude that a mature, self-conscious form of realism cannot escape from a “thoroughly constructivist account” of objectivity.

The form of constructivism that Margolis wants to defend has two distinctive features. Firstly, it is radically anti-subjectivist, where by ‘subjectivism’ Margolis means two different things: on the one hand, the unilateral and excessive emphasis on the creative power of the self to the detriment of the legitimate rights of the object; on the other hand, the idea that the categories of understanding are a priori fixed features of the human mind. Secondly, it is intended to hold only for the refined pictures of reality generated by sciences. For these reasons, his version of constructivism is less ambitious than Kant’s original one. Indeed, it does not pretend to provide a general account of objectivity, but only to clarify the main aspects of the process of ‘epistemological’ constitution of scientific entities. Similarly, it does not accept Kant’s idea that a satisfactory account of objectivity depends upon the discovery of a list of immutable categories from which to derive the ways in which a mind imposes transcendental constraints on everything that can count as an object of experience. The conception of a liberalized ‘a priori’ is the horizon within which Margolis formulates his rejection of the notion of transcendental necessity (Margolis 2012: Chapter 2, 31). Following the footsteps of Hegel, Margolis argues that the very idea of a transcendental necessity should be replaced with a more empirical view according to which the categories of understanding are “continually relativized to the habituated practices of a given ethos” (Margolis 2012: Chapter 1, 40).

This is, I think, the sense of Margolis’ long statement quoted at the beginning of the present section, in which the reasons of his dissatisfaction with Kant’s transcendental project are clearly expressed. By contrasting Kant’s idealism with post-Kantian Idealism, Margolis aims at calling attention to Kant’s unwarranted assumption that the ‘subjectivist’ identity of idealism and realism entails the “ontic construction of the whole of ‘reality’ itself” (Margolis 2012: Chapter 1, 47; see also Margolis 2010: 100-111). This move is probably due to his fear of laying himself open to the charge of metaphysical constructivism. But is it truly so? Is Margolis entitled to draw such a conclusion from the remark that “‘idealism’ (in the Kantian sense) holds that what is empirically ‘real’ is actually constituted (in part at least) by what is subjective in origin and nature”? To state it more clearly, is Margolis right in believing that the ‘subjectivity of the categories of

understanding' is intimately connected to the possibility of accounting for reality – the empirically real – as a construction, and that such an extension of the constructivist paradigm implies an idealistic ontology? Isn't it possible to take a step back and to see these two aspects – transcendentalism and constructivism – as responding to different problems that Kant unfortunately attempts to merge together? I will try to argue for the latter position in the following way. First of all, I will show that, contrary to what Margolis seems to believe, the notion of constructivism is metaphysically unproblematic. Then, I will focus attention on the general philosophical consequences that follows from the recognition of this fact. Finally, I will spend a few words to explain why I believe that a thorough naturalism cannot make the distinction between the empirically real and the scientific pictures of the world.

Constructivism is usually defined as that epistemological position which emphasizes the role of mind in the construction of known reality (Parrini 2006: 2374, see also Margolis 2012: Chapter 1, 46). The origins of this view can be traced back to Vico and Hobbes, but its most influential version has been formulated by Kant. In a central passage of the second-edition Transcendental Deduction Kant writes: "An object [...] is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united" (Kant 1781/1787: B137). On this view – which Margolis correctly conceives of as the most important theoretical achievement of modern philosophy – the identity of object and concept, subjective and objective, realism and idealism, is explicitly stated. Reality and our understanding of it *convertuntur* since the unity of the object is nothing but the unity of its correspondent concept. Unfortunately, Kant's dualism prevents him from developing a consistent idealism. In this sense, the history of post-Kantian philosophy from Fichte to C. I. Lewis can be profitably depicted as a series of attempts to overcome the dichotomy of sense and understanding, a posteriori and a priori, synthetic and analytic. However, in the Transcendental Schematism Kant provides the conceptual means to extend his constructivist insight to hold for every kind of object. Indeed, here Kant maintains that the schema of sensible concepts and the schema of a pure concept of understanding share the same fundamental structure: the schema of a concept – no matter whether pure or empirical – "signifies a rule of the synthesis of imagination" in accordance with that general concept (Kant 1781/1787: A141/B180). But this means that constructivism can be separated without loss from the 'transcendentalist' and 'subjectivist' hypothesis of the fixed nature of the categories of human understanding. The intelligibility of an object is the result of its being constructed according to an universal rule: this is the whole meaning of a mature constructivist position. Its core is the functional account of objectivity. Object is everything that can be constructed in accordance with a concept. Consequently, both the objects of common sense – what Margolis calls the 'empirically real' – and the postulated entities of science are constructs. Indeed, not only the entities postulated in sciences, but also the objects encountered and used in our everyday transactions with the environment possess a degree of intelligibility that makes it possible for a knowing agent to understand their behavior in the context of a purposeful activity.

In the light of what has been said until now, it should be easier to see why a constructivist approach to the issue of objectivity should be considered metaphysically unproblematic. Indeed, what is constructed is not the existence of an object but its meaning. Reality and concept are *semantic* notions, and the idealism that stems from the adoption of the constructivist viewpoint – *pace* Margolis – is a critical idealism that inquires into the conditions of possibility of the meaningfulness of the human world. It is very likely that Margolis' reservations are due at least in part to his almost exclusive interest in the problem of truth, which obviously entails the problem of the relationship between thought and

reality. However, no one better than a pragmatist should appreciate the importance of this shift from existence and truth to meaning. In the end, Peirce's pragmatic maxim is nothing but a refined way of formulating the semantic identity of object and concept – the mediating element being the much discussed notion of conceivable practical bearings. So, it is rather surprising that Margolis does not see that the *semantic* thesis that human beings construct their objects in conformity to the rules involved in their concepts does not seem to support the *metaphysical* conclusion that human beings constitute what is empirically real.

What is even more surprising is that, in order to reject the metaphysical interpretation of constructivism, Margolis contrasts the real world with our pictures of it. In an extremely obscure passage Margolis writes: "Nothing [...] requires that the real world must be constructed by human agents: what is constructed is one or another picture of the world" (Margolis 2012: Chapter 2, 12). I must admit I find hard to locate the source of Margolis' difficulties. However, this excerpt seems to me to be surprising because the distinction that Margolis introduces seems to presuppose the distinctions between subjective and objective he wants to criticize. This point can be highlighted by reflecting upon a passage drawn by Kant's *Jäsche Logic*. Writing about the difference between form and matter in cognition, Kant remarks:

If a savage sees a house from a distance, for example, with whose use he is not acquainted, he admittedly has before him in his representation the very same object as someone else who is acquainted with it determinately as a dwelling established for men. But as to form, this cognition of one and the same object is different in the two. With the one it is mere intuition, with the other it is intuition and concept at the same time. (Kant 1992: 544-55)

In the context of an analysis of the empirical differences generated by the possession of a concept, the statement is perfectly correct. But if it is taken to mean something more than that – and Margolis seems to be willing to draw relevant conclusions from it –, it becomes malicious. In Kant's argument, the epistemic access to a meaningful world is presupposed as an implicit premise. On the contrary, Margolis' distinction between the real world and its scientific images seems to question precisely the validity of this premise. If I understand him aright, Margolis is saying here two different things: a) that all the pictures that have been constructed in the history of science refer to an underlying reality of which they are all pictures; and b) that the real world has a kind of intelligibility that is not the one proper of the object of sciences.

But what is 'the real world'? In my opinion, the only answer that does not commit Margolis to an untenable and contradictory metaphysical dualism is the one that identifies the real world with the world of common sense. Besides, the very contrast between real world and scientific images makes sense if and only if the real world does not lie beyond the scope of our experience. Copernican and Ptolemaic theories give radically different representations of the astronomical reality, but their common ground is the man that looks at the sky and sees the rhythm of day and night. As Dewey puts in the opening chapter of *Experience and Nature*, the world of common sense, the world that the human beings inhabit, is the pillar to which "the vine of pendant theory is attached" (Dewey 1929/1981: 11).

However, if the real world is taken to be the world of common sense rather than an unknowable thing in itself, Margolis' restriction of the constructivist explanation of meaning to the account of the entities of science loses great part of its force. To say that the objects of common sense are not constructed but given would entail the admission of a

source of meaning and objectivity that cannot be explained in experimental and naturalistic terms. Indeed, one of the great theoretical advantages of the adoption of a constructivist point of view is that it allows us to provide a simple, yet comprehensive account of the processes through which a human being succeeds in creating a meaningful and ordered world. Meanings are traced back to the acts of an organism bringing together means and ends, stimuli and responses, as a consequence of which the latter can be read *into* the former (Dewey 1896/1972: 98). This, for instance, is the way in which Dewey explains the constitution of the moral world out of morally meaningless impulses in the pages of *Human Nature and Conduct*.

For a pragmatist, meaning is the act of anticipating the consequences of a certain event, and the fact that objects have a meaning is the condition of possibility of there being a world. The world of common sense is therefore the world structured by the habits of behavior an agent has acquired in the course of his prior experience and education. The objects of common sense are nothing but settled ways of responding to the standard stimuli presented by the environment. This is the sense of Dewey's otherwise puzzling remark that objects are "habits turned inside out" (Dewey 1922/1983: 127). But this means that the real world is constructed in the same way – and in the very same sense – in which the postulated entities of science are constructed: that is, by singling out those elements that can be used as reliable signs of future possible consequences.

## II

From what has been said above it follows that classical pragmatists – notably, Dewey, but the same holds true for James – believe constructivism to be the only theory of *meaning* compatible with a thorough naturalism. In recent times, many scholars have tried to recover the genuine constructivist spirit of pragmatism. However, in order to outline the main features of a neo-pragmatist and post-analytic account of objectivity, they have unfortunately relied on the language of transcendental philosophy. So, for instance, Pihlström has maintained that pragmatism is "the key to the naturalization of transcendental conditions", where by 'transcendental conditions' he means the social, cultural and historical constraints that are imposed on us as people of a certain age (Pihlström 2001: 230). On this reading, human beings agree in a form of life: its general structures define the "(quasi-) *transcendental* conditions" that determine how its members should think and act (Pihlström 2001: 230).

Even though this lax use of 'transcendental' is now widely accepted, I agree with Margolis that the identification of constructivism with transcendentalism is misleading. As has already been remarked above, constructivism is an extremely general theory revolving around the idea of the essential interwovenness of the subjective and the objective, while transcendental philosophy is only one of the possible forms in which the constructivist insight can be articulated. This remark is particularly relevant for our purposes since, as Margolis has pointed out, the history of pragmatism cannot be properly understood if this distinction is not borne in mind. Pragmatism is an ambitious attempt to continue Hegel's (and Kant's) project "along naturalistic and post-Darwinian lines" (Margolis 2012: Chapter 1, 36). For this reason, I think that Pihlström is wrong in interpreting the habits of action that structure our common-sense knowledge of the world as (*quasi-*)*transcendental* rules of construction of reality. Undoubtedly, the habits of action are the naturalistic counterparts of the Kantian categories of understanding: they are a priori rules of constitution of objectivity whose validity can be accounted for in terms of their effectiveness in construing an ordered

and intelligible world. But they are not transcendental because the naturalization of the Kantian a priori dramatically undermines the theoretical framework that makes it possible to speak in a meaningful way of *transcendental* conditions for our having a world in view.

This point can be highlighted with an example. In a certain sense, it is possible to argue that the fact of having a brain with a particular structure should be conceived of as one of these (quasi-)transcendental conditions. Indeed, if our brain were different, our experience would not be possible – or, at least, it would be markedly different. This is a formally valid transcendental argument since it states a necessary relationship between the protasis and the apodosis. Now, a ‘transcendental’ argument so constructed seems to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the whole theory rather than a step towards the naturalization of transcendental philosophy. Obviously, a defender of transcendental arguments would remind us that the kind of necessity holding between the protasis and the apodosis is not empirical, but metaphysical. It is taken to express “certain metaphysical constraints that can be established by reflection”, and that hold in every possible world (Stern 1999: 3). However, such a move is not open to a pragmatist. Since he is both a thorough naturalist and a radical constructivist, he cannot admit either the idea of a metaphysical constraint or the distinction between reflection and empirical observation. Every habit of behavior is a natural event, a particular way in which the biological nature of a human being realizes itself. Accordingly, the necessity that characterizes the structuring conditions of our experience is not metaphysically, but functionally and historically a priori: it is the necessity of a rule that prescribes a certain course of action to an agent, and whose provisional validity is a consequence of its having proved itself to be efficient as a norm of conduct.

I think that Margolis is completely right on this point: the adoption of a relativized conception of the a priori compels us to accept the radical view that reason is going to become “increasingly fragmentary, parochial, fluxive, historicized” because of the increasing complexity of the world with which human beings interact (Margolis 2012: Chapter 1, 44). In my view, this is the essential core of a consistent constructivist naturalism. However, this does not mean that the notion of transcendental should be cast aside as a completely useless tool. Margolis’ rejection of it seems to me a little bit too rash. If we pay attention to the way in which Kant defines this concept, we notice that ‘transcendental’ does not refer to our objects, but only to our knowledge of these objects insofar as this is possible a priori (Kant 1781/87: A 11-12/B 25). This remark gives us a clue about how to develop a plausible conception of transcendental philosophy which could be incorporated within a thoroughly naturalistic framework.

Since it is not possible to discuss in detail all the various issues involved in this way of conceiving transcendental philosophy, I will limit myself to sketch its general outlines. It has been noted above that transcendental is not a property of a set of concepts, but a possible attitude that an agent may take regarding the nature and validity of the a priori conditions of experience. The structure of the *sui generis* logical space of transcendental reflections is not different in principle to that of the most advanced sciences: indeed, the methods and procedures used to confirm or reject an assertion are the same through and through. This is, I think, the cash value of Margolis’ thesis of the “inseparability of our first- and second-order questions” (Margolis 2012: Chapter 1, 11). The questions concerning our knowledge of the world are methodologically continuous with the questions concerning our knowledge of knowledge. But this does not imply that the aim of the transcendental attitude is to provide a general theory of objectivity. This is the ultimate reason why I believe that it is important to keep constructivism and transcendental

philosophy separated. The aim of a transcendental approach is much more modest than that: it is to provide a general account of what it means to be a scientific picture of reality. Transcendental reflection takes the results of natural sciences as given, and inquires into the conditions of possibility of these practices of knowledge. From Kant's transcendental standpoint, the problem is that of finding a metaphysical warrant for the objective validity of the categories. From a naturalistic perspective, the search for such a warrant is meaningless because scientific concepts are historical products. Again, Margolis is right in saying that "the contingency of our first-ordered answers ineluctably infects the conditions of validity of all answers to our second-order questions" (Margolis 2012: Chapter 1, 11).

But if this is true, what is the function performed by transcendental reflection? I think that its function is to formulate testable hypotheses about the nature of rationality, which can be used as basis for future scientific inquiries. Even though they both are ways of constructing a meaningful world, common sense and science differ in their complexity. The processes that constitute scientific entities are controlled and self-critical, while the biological activities that constitute everyday objects are largely imprecise and incomplete. They are incomplete because common-sense concepts are undetermined with regard to many of the properties of their correspondent objects. This is a consequence of the fact that our everyday transactions with the world do not require the kind of precision needed in modern scientific experiments. The concept of water enables us to forecast the behavior of that object in standard conditions, but it does not say anything about its possible behavior in exceptional circumstances: water is what can be used to drink and wash clothes (Dewey 1929/1984: 126ff.). At the very same time, the relative simplicity of the transactions constituting everyday objects guarantees the relative stability of the world of common sense. On the contrary, scientific objects are defined intra-theoretically: so, the meaning of water varies according to the different scientific frameworks used to interpret it. Now, it is of the nature of scientific objects to be subjected to a continuous process of refinement, with the aim to increase their explanatory power. This process of revision *can* be guided by a regulative idea of what human beings, at a certain time in history, consider a satisfactory conception of reason, meaning, and objectivity. Traditionally, this idea has taken the form of a unified theory of rationality. My suggestion is that the goal of transcendental reflection is precisely to impose some constraints of this sort on the way in which a scientific theory should be made. Obviously, all these constraints are only provisional and tentative. Nonetheless, they are not arbitrary. They are justified, retrospectively, by their being attuned to the most advanced scientific and technical knowledge of the time, and, prospectively, by their being expression of the cognitive needs and desires of (some) members of a scientific community. This constructivist conception of the transcendental is genuinely naturalistic, so that a pragmatist should not feel uncomfortable with it even though it sets itself to counterbalance the dissolution of the unity of reason determined by the relativization of the Kantian a priori. On this reading, transcendental philosophy is one of the tools that human beings have created in the long course of their history in order to enhance the understanding of reality (Preti 1973: 149ff.). There is no legitimate reason not to exploit it apart from the empirical assessment of its uselessness.

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