

# ***IDEALISM versus REALISM***

**Ronen Grunberg and John Smithin**

**The Tuesday Philosophy Club**



**Aurora Philosophy Institute (API)**



# Idealism *versus* Realism

**THE BIG  
ISSUE**



# The 'War' between Plato and Aristotle



# The 'Philosophical Order'

- ☐ Metaphysics
- ☐ Epistemology
- ☐ Ethics
- ☐ Politics



Is this a 'strict hierarchy'?

Is it even *possible* to address ethics or politics without having first done the 'ontological and epistemological spadework'?

# For Example:

**Metaphysics:  
A Supernatural  
Deity**

**Epistemology:  
Divine  
Revelation**

**Ethics:  
'The Ten  
Commandments'  
(or similar)**

**Politics:  
Theocracy**







**St. Thomas Aquinas**

# ‘Philosophy Standing on One Foot’



# ACCORDING TO THE ATLAS SOCIETY

*Ayn Rand was once asked if she could present the basics of her philosophy, in short form, while standing on one foot. Here's what she said:*

**1. *METAPHYSICS*: OBJECTIVE REALITY**

**2. *EPISTEMOLOGY*: REASON**

**3. *ETHICS*: SELF-INTEREST**

**4. *POLITICS*: LAISSEZ- FAIRE CAPITALISM**





# From the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*

idealism: 'Any doctrine holding that reality is fundamentally mental in nature'.

realism/anti-realism: 'The standard opposition between those who affirm and those who deny the real existence of some kind of thing, or some kind of fact or state of affairs.'



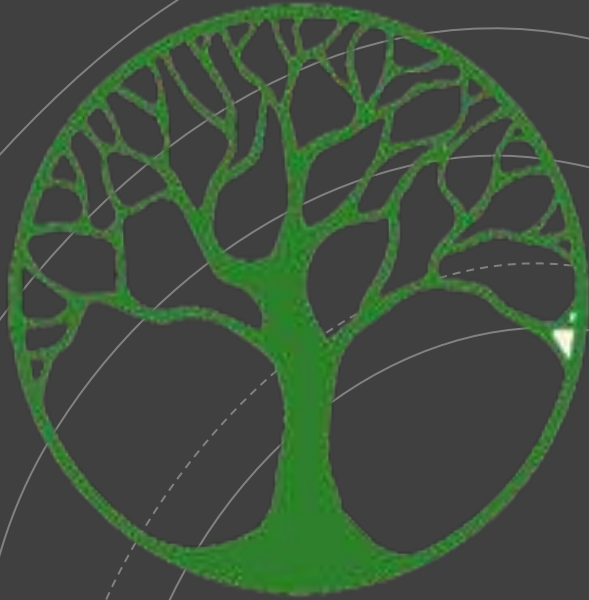


# Rasmussen and Den Uyl: *The Realist Turn* (2020)

‘Metaphysical realism involves both an *ontological* and an *epistemological* thesis – namely that there are beings that exist and they are what they are independent of our cognition of them’



‘(M)etaphysical realism is vital for arguing that individual human beings have basic ‘negative’ natural rights ... and for providing a non-reductive naturalistic account of human good’



If a Tree Falls in the Forest ...?

# The Critique of Knowledge

‘A realist critique of knowledge is like a squared circle ...’ (Gilson).

The critique of knowledge is the modernist philosophical project that began with ‘Cartesian doubt’, continued *via* the ‘British empiricists’ such as Locke and Hume, through Kant (*Critique of Pure Reason*) and on to German idealism, pragmatism, linguistic analysis, existentialism and post modernism.

Critical realism attempts to provide an antidote, but Gilson think that the critique of knowledge and realism are incompatible. Is this correct?





# About the 'Realist Turn'

John Searle says that:

‘This investigation ... [his project] ... is historically situated. It is not the sort of thing that could have been undertaken a hundred years ago, or even fifty years ago. In earlier eras most philosophers ... were preoccupied with epistemic question. Even questions of language and society were construed as largely epistemic. How do we know what other people mean when they talk? [*etc.*] ... These are interesting questions but ... largely peripheral. In the present era we have ... [largely] ... overcome our three-hundred-year obsession with epistemology and skepticism.’



# An Intellectual Spectrum



**Idealism**



**Critical Idealism**



# An Intellectual Spectrum (continued)



**Critical Realism**



**Realism**



# The Basic Axioms of Reality

## ☐ Existence

‘Existence exists’, there is ‘something’ rather ‘nothing’, *etc.*

## ☐ Identity

*A* is *A*, *A* is not ‘*not A*’, and so forth.

## ☐ Consciousness

Consciousness is a property of a subset of living beings (*e.g.*, humans). This view is called ‘biological naturalism’. This does NOT refer to the Cartesian ‘*cogito*’. It not a question of ‘I think therefore I am’ but, ‘*I am therefore I think*’ (quote from Gilson).



# What are the Implications of the Axioms?

---

**Identity implies Causality**

**Existence Has Primacy Over  
Consciousness**

**The Metaphysically Given is  
the Absolute**



# Identity Implies Causality



- ❑ If  $A$  is  $A$ ,  $B$  is  $B$ ,  $C$  is  $C$ , *etc.* then for change/movement to occur  $A$  must cause  $B$ ,  $B$  must cause  $C$ , and so on (The principle of causality.)
- ❑ But then there is the problem of infinite regress. There must be an ‘uncaused cause’, or a ‘prime mover’, or something, to get the ball rolling.
- ❑ What should we do to solve this problem? Typically, some form of supernatural consciousness is chosen, a God, or a ‘World Spirit’, or ‘the One’, or some such. But this seems incoherent. We would have to some kind of free-floating intellect - which is *not* biologically grounded. The only alternative is to make existence itself the primary.



# Existence has Primacy over Consciousness

❑ The *Primacy of Existence* rather than the *Primacy of Consciousness* is a key realist principle. (Rules out idealism)

❑ There are three types of *Primacy of Consciousness*;

- Supernatural (God's Consciousness)
- Personal (Subjectivism)
- Social (Group Consciousness)



# The Metaphysically Given is the Absolute

---

❑ This means 'physical reality', in the sense of the various laws of nature, physics, chemistry, biology, and so on. (And, also, *process* rather than an inventory of unchanging 'things').

❑ On the other hand, social relations are 'real', but not metaphysically given. There must be a *Construction of Social Reality* (the title of Searle's book).





# Idealism and Materialism Reject the Axioms

- ❑ Strangely, if you look at any philosophical dictionary ‘idealism’ and ‘materialism’ are what is given as opposites, *not* idealism and realism.
- ❑ However, this is false. Both idealism and materialism reject the axioms in one way or another. Idealism rejects the primacy of existence, and materialism rejects consciousness.
- ❑ They both fail.



# Realism is Not Co- Extensive with Materialism

- ❑ Social facts, determined by collective intentionality, are immaterial but real.
- ❑ But they can, and do, have causal effects on the material world, (*e.g.*, the ‘line in the sand’, money, *etc.*)
- ❑ Therefore, there *is* a realm which is not material but is real. But is this necessarily spiritual or supernatural?
- ❑ The ontology of the social world is different from that of the physical or material world. However, they are still part of the same *single* world of existence, and must be consistent with one another. This rules out *dualism*.



# Ontological *versus* Epistemological Objectivity and Subjectivity



□ The ‘brute facts’ (physical facts) are both ontologically and epistemologically objective.

□ Social facts are ontologically subjective (collective intentionality), but epistemologically objective.



# Knowledge, Opinion, and Truth in Social Science



- ❑ As social facts are epistemologically objective - even if ontologically subjective - there can ‘be’ social *science*, and actual *knowledge* rather than mere opinion.
- ❑ An idealist ‘thinks’, but a realist ‘knows’ (Gilson).
- ❑ It is possible to *aspire* to truth even though it might not actually be achieved in any particular investigation.
- ❑ ‘Critical’ realism, of which the *starting point* is the critique of knowledge, is untenable.