

Welcome Back Kant. New Realism and the Perceptual (Cor)Relation

If there is a common factor in the varieties of realism that have characterized philosophy at the beginning of the XXI century, this is the rejection of correlationism. The latter is the claim that we only ever access to the correlation between subjects and objects, not to objects as they are. In this sense, new realism can be seen as a quest for ways out from correlationism. In recent realist works, the refusal of correlationism, as a philosophical claim, often goes together with the historical claim that the roots of correlationism lie in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, from which the correlationist tree has spread through the XIX and the XX centuries. The connection between the new realist philosophical claim and its historical corollary is already at work in two seminal realist books both published at the very beginning of the XXI century, namely, Maurizio Ferraris' *Goodbye Kant* (2004) and Quentin Meillassoux's *After Finitude* (2006).

In this paper, I will slightly deviate from such a line of thought by proposing a *Kantian* way out from correlationism. I will argue that Kant's philosophy not only gives rise to correlationism but also provides us with some theoretical tools that allow us to overcome it. More specifically, in § 1, I shall analyze the notions of correlation and correlationism; in § 2, I shall propose a realist way out from correlationism based on a realist account of perception; in § 3, I shall trace this realist view back to its Kantian roots; in § 4, I will address the main issue that Kant's philosophy raises for a realist conception.

1. Let us begin with the characterization of correlationism that Meillassoux provides at the beginning of his book *After Finitude*: "the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant seems to be that of *correlation*. By 'correlation' we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other. We will henceforth call *correlationism* any current of thought which maintains the unsurpassable character of the correlation so

defined” (2006, 5). The definition looks circular since ‘correlation’ is defined as the idea according to which we only ever have access to the *correlation* between thinking and being. What the correlation is, thus, remains obscure, and this makes the very notion of correlationism a bit puzzling. However, we can address this issue by replacing ‘correlation’ with ‘relation’ in the *definiens*. Correlation thus becomes the idea according to which we only ever have access to the *relation* between thinking and being, thereby overcoming circularity. The notion of relation is well entrenched in logic and theoretical philosophy, and we can rely on it in order to characterize correlation and correlationism. Meillassoux himself seems to suggest a similar strategy when he characterizes correlationism as the claim that “we never grasp an object ‘in itself’, in isolation from its *relation* to the subject” (2006, 5, my emphasis).

That being the case, one might wonder what is wrong with correlationism. In fact, there is a sense in which correlationism looks plainly true: *we* never *grasp* an object in isolation from its *relation* to the subject because *we* are the subject and *grasping* is a relation! If a subject knows the true nature of an object, she entertains a knowledge relation to this object. In this sense correlationism is not what prevents the discovery of the true nature of objects, but rather what enables it. This cannot be the sense of correlationism that is under discussion in new realism.

Correlationism becomes problematic only if one conceives of correlation as a relation that prevents any knowledge of the object. In order to know an object, we need to be in some relation to it, this is obvious. Yet, if any actual relation to the object involves a sort of thick veil that prevents us from having access to the real features of the object, then knowledge of the object becomes impossible. To resort to a simile, if my relation to my neighbor consists in an insurmountable wall, I cannot know my neighbor. In this sense, correlationism raises a challenge to any realist philosophy. In the correlationist framework, in which the subjects cannot access objects as they are, there remain two options available, namely, skepticism, according to which objects as such cannot be known, and idealism, according to which objects as such do not exist and thought is the only reality.

2. My favorite way to challenge correlationism consists in rejecting the claim that any mental state involves correlation. Let us suppose, for the sake of the argument, that intentionality is the mark of the mental so that any mental state involves an intentional relation to some object. Does this entail that any mental state involve correlation? I do not think so. In fact, there is a variety of mental states, and some of them can involve correlation, but others surely do not. Imagination, for instance, is a mental state that can involve correlation. I can imagine an object without being capable of *knowing* anything about what that object really is. I can even ignore whether the imagined object really exists. However, perception and memory do not function in this way. In such mental states, the intentional relation is a factive relation, that entails the reality of both its *relata*, namely, the perceiving (or remembering) subject and the perceived (or remembered) object. I can imagine something that does not exist but I cannot perceive (or remember) something that does not exist. At least, this is what is stated by realist accounts of perception and memory.

Let us focus on perception since memory can be conceived of as a recall of a previous perception, so that the factivity of memory relies on the factivity of perception. The idea that perception is a factive mental state is crucial in British anti-Hegelian and anti-Kantian philosophy at the beginning of the XX century, though in two different ways (cf. Gomes 2017, 529). On the one hand, in Cambridge, G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell argue that perception gives us direct access to mind-independent but non-physical entities such as color *qualia* or shape *qualia*. They call “sense-data” such entities and “acquaintance” the relation that gives us access to them. They explain hallucinations as cases of mismatch between the infallible experience of sense data and the fallible belief about what caused this experience. On the other hand, in Oxford, John Cook Wilson and H.A. Prichard argue that perception gives us direct access to concrete particulars such as flowers or tables. This view, which has been called ‘naive realism’, has characterized Oxford philosophy during the whole XX century, thanks especially to the works of John Austin and Peter Strawson, and remains nowadays one of the leading position in the

philosophy of perception thanks to the work of other Oxford-educated philosophers like John McDowell, Paul Snowdon and Mike Martin. From a naive realist perspective, hallucinations and perception are completely different mental states because the latter are constituted by the perceived objects while the former are not. In this sense naive realism leads to disjunctivism, that is, an account of perception that treats it as essentially disjointed from hallucination.

Naive realism is not philosophically naive. It is naive only in the sense that it states that a naive non-philosophical observer succeeds in knowing the world, in spite of her naivety, because perception, as such, gives her a reliable direct access to the world. Neither is naive realism dogmatic, since it does not assume that perception is a direct relation to objects but rather demonstrates this by means of an insightful analysis of the very notion of perception. According to this analysis, a perceptual state involves a constitution relation to the perceived object, which enter as a constituent in the perceptual state itself. Perception can give us direct access to its objects because the objects themselves, as such, enter into the perceptual states. A basic way to characterize the constitution relation is in term of an asymmetric dependence: if the object had not been there, that perceptual state could not have occurred; however, if that perceptual state had not occurred, the object might have still been there. Thus the perceptual relation, as a constitution relation, entails not only that the object can be directly accessed, but also that the object can exist independently of its being perceived. This ultimately leads to a confutation of the correlationist claim that we cannot know mind-independent objects.

A key role in naive realist accounts of perception is played by the notion of a look (cf. Martin 2010). If I see an apple, I cannot help seeing it from a certain standpoint, which depends on me, not on the object itself. However, what the object shows to me is an objective feature, namely, the look it has when observed from that standpoint. The look, so understood, is an observer-independent feature, since the object has it even if the corresponding standpoint remains unoccupied. The look is there to be grasped, and remains there even if there is nobody to grasp it.

In sum, naive realism overcome correlationism by treating perception as providing

the mind with a direct access to a world of mind-independent concrete particulars. At this point, a defender of correlationism has two objections at her disposal. The first one consists in arguing that the naive realist account of perception is wrong, since perceptual states does not involve a direct relation to their objects but rather a representation of these objects, which prevents knowing what these really are. This objection amounts to tracing the debate between new realism and correlationism in ontology back to the debate between naive realism and representationalism in the philosophy of perception. This amounts to acknowledging that the debate on correlationism is nothing but a rephrasing on an ongoing debate in the philosophy of perception. That is why I will not address this objection in this paper. It does not contribute to a better understanding of the debate on correlationism, but simply reduces it to another debate. The issue of correlationism becomes merely hypothetical: if representationalism is the right account of perception, then correlationism might hold, while if naive realism is the right account of perception then correlationism is defeated.

I will focus, instead, on the second correlationist objection, which assumes, for the sake of the argument, that naive realism is right, and yet argues that the objects to which perception gives us direct access are not real objects, but only mere appearances. Even though perception gives us access to objects and not just to representations of objects, these objects are not genuine elements of reality but rather a veil that prevents us from knowing reality. Thus, correlationism is back in action even within a naive realist framework. In Kantian terms, one might say that perception gives us access only to “phenomenal objects”, not to “noumenal objects”. Graham Harman (2011) seems to have something similar in mind when he distinguishes between “sensuous objects” and “reals objects”.

We are thus led back to Kant. His distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal seems to be the rock to be overcome if one wants to get rid of correlationism. In what follows, I will argue that Kant’s philosophy provides us with the theoretical means to overcome this correlationist rock that he himself put in the middle of the realist road.

3. As argued by Peter Strawson (1966, 1979) and, more recently, by Anil Gomes (2014, 2017), Kant's philosophy provides us with an account of perception as "an *immediate* consciousness of the existence of the things outside us" (Strawson 1979, 132). This is, according to Strawson, the main outcome of the Kant's transcendental investigation. If we wonder what conditions make our experience possible, we discover some basic principles that are to hold if we could enjoy experiences. But we do enjoy experiences, and therefore such principles do hold. And these principles entail that our experiences gives us access to mind-independent things.

First of all, in Strawson's reading of Kant, experience essentially is a temporal series of states that are to be ascribed to a unique subject, namely the transcendental subject. Yet, for experience to be possible, such temporal subjective series should differentiate itself from an objective order. Experience precisely such a differentiation, such a subjective route through an objective world. As Strawson puts it, "No one could be conscious of a temporally extended series of experiences as *his* unless he could be aware of them as yielding knowledge of a unified objective world, through which the series of experiences in question forms just one subjective or experiential route" (Strawson 1966, 27). We cannot make our experience understandable to ourselves without presupposing an objective world on which our experience gives us a subjective glance. Only in this way experience can exist as something subjective, in contrast with the objectivity of the world experienced. In his examination of Strawson's reading of Kant, Richard Rorty (1970) calls this the "objectivity argument"

What this argument shows is not only that experience involves an objective world, but also that this must be a spatiotemporal world. While experience is nothing but a temporal series of mental states, the world to whom experience gives us access must have not only a temporal dimension but also some spatial dimension. The reason is that the objects of experience, in virtue of their very objectivity, must keep existing even when the experience does not occur. Space precisely is what makes room for the existence of objects when unperceived. Since the experience is just a temporal series, if the only

dimension of the world had been time, there would be no way to distinguish the subjective temporal order of experience from the objective temporal order of the world experienced.

Space thus introduces a crucial distinction between experience and the world experienced by providing the latter with a dimension that the former lacks. That is why the world is an objective order whereas the experience is just a subjective series. The objectivity of the world relies on a spatiotemporal manifold in which, in virtue of space, things can exist unexperienced, whereas the subjectivity of experience amounts to a merely temporal series made of mental states that are, as such, experienced.

In sum, the subjective temporal order of experience can be distinguished from the objective temporal order of the world that experience goes through because space makes the difference. I see an eagle flying *and then* the deer walking but the eagle is flying *while* the deer is walking, and I am well aware of that. This awareness presupposes the awareness of a mind-independent space in which both the eagle and the deer have a place even when they are not perceived. The deer follows the eagle in the subjective temporal order of my experience but the former is simultaneous with the latter in the objective spatiotemporal order of the world experienced.

The connection between the subjective temporal order of experience and the objective spatiotemporal order is provided by the body of the subject of experience. On the one hand, this body is a spatial object in the objective order just as things like flowers, tables, mountains and planets are. On the other hand, the temporal series that constitutes the subject's experience is determined by the position of the subject's body in the objective spatiotemporal order. That is to say that the subject's body occupies a temporal series of spatial positions in the objective world that corresponds to a temporal series of viewpoints on this very world that are actualized by the temporal series of perceptual states that constitutes the subject's experience. The physical trajectory of the body in the objective spatiotemporal order thus underlies the experiential trajectory of the mind that constitutes the subjective temporal order. In this way, the subject's body supports the subject's experience understood, in Strawson's terms, as a subjective route through an

objective world. This leads us to “a certain view of the world, as containing objects, variously propertied, located in a common space and continuing their existence independently of our interrupted and relatively fleeting perceptions of them” (Strawson 1979, 128).

Both the experience as a subjective temporal series and the world as an objective spatiotemporal order are real, but in different ways. The world is real as such, whereas the experience is real because the world supplies both a series of standpoints and a body that enables the subject to enjoy the perspectives corresponding to these standpoints.

However, the fact that the experience relies on the body does not entail that the former boil down to the latter. That is because the relation that constitute the experience is not of the same kind as those relations that just involve bodies or other concrete things. One might call the former relationship ‘affection’ and the latter ‘causation’. While causation has concrete objects as both its *relata*, affection has one *relatum* that is a concrete object, namely the object perceived, and the other that is not a concrete object, namely the experience enjoyed. Of course, experience is supported by a causal relation that connects the object perceived to the body of the perceiver, but affection does not boil down to this relation. As Strawson points out, affection, unlike causation, cannot be “established by noting correlations between independently observable state of affairs” (1974, 77). On the one hand, we can *observe* that an object causes the change or movement of another object, for instance we can observe that a banana peel causes a man to fall. On the other hand, we cannot *observe* that the object causes an experience of ours. We cannot observe, for instance, that a tree causes our visual experience of that tree. All we can do is to enjoy our experience of the tree. While the causal relations can be observed in an experience, the affection relation can only be enjoyed as an experience.

The world that makes the experience possible and is revealed by the experience itself can be called, borrowing Sellars’ (1963) adjective, the “manifest world”. It might be that the manifest world is not the whole world, but only the ontological region of the world that the experience can reach. However, this does not entail that the manifest world and the experience of it are not real. Indeed, being part of a real whole entails being real,

not being unreal.

Strawson's objectivity argument only shows the reality of the manifest world, but remains neutral on whether the manifest world is the whole world or just a part of a wider world. Physically-minded or metaphysically-minded philosophers might argue that the manifest world derives from a sort of "source code" that can be figured out in terms of mathematical structures. Yet, even if this is the case, this does not entail the unreality of the manifest world. If something derives from something real, the former should be real in turn. As Sellars puts it, the manifest world "is not something that needs to be *reconciled with* the scientific image, but rather something to be *joined to it*" (1963, 40). The manifest world is compatible with the scientific discovery of a deeper world from which the former derives. Indeed, the scientific discovery of the features of this world essentially relies on the recognition of its effects on the manifest world to whom we have access in virtue of our perceptual experience.

4. Kant acknowledges that the manifest world revealed by the experience and the deeper world known by the science are in fact one and the same world. This is what allows him to ground scientific knowledge in the transcendental structures of experience. However, this also leads him to state that the manifest world and the deep world are nothing but two aspects of a phenomenal world, whose structure is determined by the transcendental structures of experience. He therefore suggests that the true world should be a noumenal world, which is completely independent from the transcendental structures of experience, and from which the experience itself somehow emerges. The noumenal world, according to Kant, is completely out of the reach of human knowledge, which is essentially constrained by the transcendental structures of experience. Here is where Kant's philosophy paves the way for correlationism.

The crucial passage, in this respect, is Kant's claim that space and time are the forms of intuition. If *space* and *time* belong to the mind, then the objective world, as a *spatiotemporal* world, comes down to a construction of the mind. Without the mind, no more space and time, and therefore no more spatiotemporal world. This seems to lead to

the correlationist claim according to which all we can know is the outcome of our mind, not the ultimate reality of the world.

There are two main strategies to face this correlationist inclination of Kant's philosophy. The first one, which Strawson himself seems to endorse, consists in arguing that space and time are not only phenomenological structures of the experience but also ontological structures of the world. Indeed, space and time are structure of experience precisely because they are structure of the world. As Strawson's objectivity argument shows, the experience must be directed towards an objective world and it can do so only if the basic structures of this world are among its constituents. Just as the experience has the real objects in the world as its constituents, the experience also has the real structures of the world, namely space and time, as its constituents. Space and time are the forms of intuition only because they are forms of the world, and intuition has the basic elements of the world as its constituents. Darwinism, which Kant could not know, allows us to strengthen this argument by treating the correspondence between structures of experience and structures of the world as an evolutionarily advantageous feature. Natural selection selects those living being whose body supports a mental activity that has the real structures of the world as its constituents.

While this first anti-correlationist strategy challenges Kant's claim that space and time are nothing but forms of intuition, the second strategy assumes it for the sake of the argument, and yet tries to face its correlationist consequences by relying on the Kantian claim that experience essentially involves a receptive component. Even if we concede to Kant that the mind contribute to what is experienced by means of space and time, it remains that, as Kant himself acknowledges, there is something in what is experienced that does not come from the mind itself. This leads to what Heidegger (1929) characterizes as "Kant's problem of metaphysics": if we assume that space and time belong to the subject, then, in order to avoid idealism, we should acknowledge that being lies beyond space and time. That is to say that we have to characterize reality by means of a notion of being that is not the naive notion of being as having a place in a spatiotemporal system.

Kant's problem of metaphysics can be rephrased by stating that whatever affects the mind thereby producing the experience, this should have a structure of its own that shows up, in the mind, as a spatiotemporal structure. Furthermore, the mind itself, with all its transcendental structures, is not a construction of the mind, and it also should be grounded in the noumenal world. Therefore, the phenomenal world is not a brand-new creation of the mind, but rather the result of the interaction of what grounds the mind at the noumenal level and something else at this very level (cfr. Chalmers 2005 and 2006, Schwitzgebel forthcoming).

The phenomenal world is the part of the noumenal world that is directly accessible to the mind, and, in principle, it can allow the mind to discover the structure of the noumenal world as a whole. In naive realist terms, one might say that the spatiotemporal phenomenal world is the *look* of the noumenal world, that is, an objective feature of the noumenal world which is actualized in its interaction with the noumenal counterpart of the mind. Ultimately, we experience the mind-independence of the noumenal world by experiencing the mind-independence of the spatiotemporal phenomenal world. Although the noumenal world is not spatiotemporal, space and time provides us with a way to experience its mind-independence.

Kant's philosophy would lead to correlationism if one conceived of the mind and its experience as not belonging to reality. In this case, space and time, as structures of the mind, have nothing to do with reality and therefore our experience of a spatiotemporal world cannot count as knowledge of reality. Yet, if we treat mind and experience as belonging to reality, we can conceive of reality, that is, the noumenal world, as a structure that makes room for an interaction that produces both the mind and the phenomenal world as its results. From this perspective, both the mind and the phenomenal world have counterparts in the noumenal world and their reality comes precisely from their deriving from such counterparts.

Surely, if we follow Kant in conceiving of space and time as belonging only to the mind, we cannot conceive of the interaction from which mind and experience derive as an interaction that occur in space and time. Yet, mathematics allows us to conceive of

interactions that are not spatiotemporal in nature. The noumenal world might be made of such interactions. This is something that science, understood as a kind of metaphysics (cfr. Aronson 1984), can strive to discover.

Both general relativity and quantum mechanics can be interpreted in such metaphysical way. For example, we can treat the curved four-dimensional geometrical structure that according to general relativity constitutes the universe as a noumenal world that can only be thought, not perceived (that's what 'noumenal' means, after all). Yet, we can be justified in treating this geometrical structure as real inasmuch as it complies with what we can experience in the phenomenal world structured by the three-dimensional space and the passage of time. Ultimately, science as metaphysics can investigate reality at the noumenal level since there is a part of reality that is already at our disposal, that is, the phenomenal world to whom perception gives us direct access.

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