

## Reality

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### Abstract

This paper deals with the question what reality is and how can we describe it. Reality is as such beyond the dichotomy of meaning and meaningless, because it is the soil of every possibility to create such a meaning. A meaning, in other words, can succeed or fail only because it refers to a reality, which is not itself pure meaning. This reality does not need to be a transcendent reality: it is just what meaning is about. This means to forswear the perspective of a meaning and a thing which stay in front of each other. Meaning is a take or grasp on reality but it remains not in front of it. Reality is the space in which meaning can occur, it is its context. The question about the actual grasp of meaning on reality is therefore a question about our act of meaning: when are we really in our meaning?

**Keywords:** reality, meaning, realism, transcendence, context

What kind of worry should a statement of realism respond to? Probably in the first place a feeling about some lost contact with the world. The great accomplishment of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the discovery of the richness of the symbolic realm: how many signs, how many codes articulate our relation to reality. One downside of that huge step forward could have been the impression that all those signs and their codes just separate us from reality, as some kind of screen between us and the latter. As if reality were just concealed behind meaning and, thus, since meaning proves to be very complex, infinitely far from us.

Realism should then perhaps be understood as the affirmation that there is really something beyond the veil of

meaning. What should, however, “really” mean here? It is difficult to make any sense of it but the one of some “transcendence”: there is *really* something in the sense that there is something that is not to be reduced to an idol of meaning, but that, as such, is *beyond* meaning. One very tempting move is to translate that transcendence to meaning into some kind of essential, metaphysical meaningfulness. As if, so that it might really be beyond meaning, reality needed to be meaningless.

Such a characterization, however, is equivocal. It can mean that reality is of such a category that it does not make sense to apply to it the very idea of meaning: reality *is just what it is* – that is its definition – and, as such, does not mean. Then, on a substantial understanding of “meaninglessness”, it does not make sense to call it “meaningless” either. Because, on that understanding, can be said “meaningless” only what could be “meaningful”, thus such that the notion of meaning can apply to it.

There has been a powerful trend in contemporary philosophy to deal with the meaningfulness of reality in the second sense, so not as a difference of category but as something more substantial, as if meaningfulness were a positive property of reality. For instance, after avoiding the pitfall to see reality as an “obstacle” – which is still a way to interpret it from the point of view of some definite “meaning” – Sartre insists on its indifference – to meaning – as some kind of stupidity – in other words: some kind of essential, and apparently agonizing *meaninglessness*. But reality is not “stupid”: it is just what it is. Why should we feel the lack of any meaning there? Is it not still a way to be mistaken and to expect some meaning from reality? Something it cannot give, not due to any kind of positive, metaphysical impossibility, but just because it is a category mistake to expect that from it.

It seems, however, that a big part of contemporary philosophy is convinced to have lost contact with reality to such extent that it is persuaded to need some kind of *break of meaning* in order to get the feeling to make contact again. A few years ago, an interesting instance of that posture was to be found in the staging of his conversion to realism by the Italian

philosopher Maurizio Ferraris (2001) in his book *The external world*. Ferraris explains *cum grano salis* that he was so to speak struck by reality beyond any construction and representation when he experienced an earthquake while staying in his hotel room in Mexico City.

Of course, the anecdote speaks for itself – precisely to the effect that reality as such might be beyond the range of our familiar speech. The earthquake questions that very soil of evidence of the earth that Husserl highlighted as an essential basis for meaning. From that point of view, the image of the earthquake is powerful.

Now, it is necessary to ask how it might come that a philosopher should need anything like an earthquake in order to get real. Reality is everywhere, and not only in the brutal breaks of meaning, in *what we cannot make sense of*. Why should it necessarily take on the form of catastrophe? Such view should certainly still be described as some subtle kind of – negative – anthropomorphism.

Of course, we do not think that Ferraris endorses such a “catastrophic view”. He certainly believes as we do that the room one is used to is as much real as the earthquake. However the interesting fact is that he feels compelled to use that kind of example in order to make his point about the non-cancellability of reality. Reality is in some way “stronger” than meaning and, in any way, independent of it.

In that kind of argument, we find always again the same idea of the “transcendence” of reality. As if what would primarily characterize reality in its irreducibility would be its being *beyond* the sphere of meaning. Now, reality might certainly be sometimes such that it is very difficult to make sense of it. And that possibility is certainly essential to what we call “reality”, to the extent that it is an aspect of the concept of reality. But it seems to be mistaken to believe that it is the core of that concept, and the trademark of reality. First because one more time not to match the human meaning would still be a characterization by the meaning and, to some extent, make reality – negatively – dependent on the latter. Second because it seems as much important that meaning as such, when the circumstances are favourable, can capture reality, as it is that,

in rough weather, it just fails to do so: we have just *no meaning* for it.

Of course, the simple fact that we can either succeed or fail in meaning is *per se* the proof that meaning is something that is done on a real soil. Either success or failure are possible only within reality. By this remark we have already switched from a point of view according to which reality should be – or not – in front of meaning to a point of view according to which it is, so to speak, all around it, and its element. We are going to return to that point soon. For the time being, let us go deeper into the fact that, if we succeed in meaning when we mean anything real, then our meaning adequately captures the thing in its reality.

That assertion, depending on the angle we adopt, is either tautological or not. On the one side, it is a mere tautological point about meaning, or at least some definite use of it. In some quite central use of meaning, it is nothing additional about meaning that it is able to reach out to reality: it is just what that kind of meaning, or that kind of use of meaning is about. On the other side, it is however not nothing to say that such meaning, when it succeeds, captures reality as such. It is to insist on the fact that, in such meaning, “the thing itself” is met.

That point supposes that the thing has a “being itself”. It is what we call its “reality”. Now, what does it mean “the thing’s being itself”? It is not a problem of identity. There is no identity but by an identification. The same thing can be identified in very different ways, and this is an important part of what meaning is about: to identify what is meant *as*. Now, to be itself, it is just *to be what it is*. And to be what it is is not something as which the thing can be identified but for very particular situations. This is what we would call the “ipseity”, “selfhood” of the thing. Everything that has an ipseity is real, that is to say, it has a being of its own. In other words, that is not only in the sense that it is meant.

Now this is a point about meaning that, in a lot of cases, meaning is exactly about that ipseity, that it is concerned with the being themselves of the things, and it is that same ipseity that it captures when it succeeds. Because the thing’s being this

or that is just a guise of its being what it is. The mistake would however be to take the thing's being what it is as a borderline case of its being this or that. It would just be a category mistake: to be what it is, is not, in general, except for the sake of metaphysics, something it would make sense to say something to be. Nevertheless, it is very commonly in view of that being what it is of the thing that we say it to be this or that. To such extent, *meaning is about reality*.

We say what we mean to be real whenever it is also in another sense than of being meant – which might however be exactly what is meant in this meaning: one power of meaning is precisely to be able to refer to that way things are in another sense than of their mere being meant.

There is therefore no need to look for a transcendence to meaning in order to establish reality – as if reality would be anything to be established. It is enough to look at meaning, what it claims and what it can. By looking at meaning, we shall find reality everywhere, as that on which, in a quite central use of it, it articulates a take. It makes no sense to say that reality as such should be “beyond” meaning: it is just what meaning is, in a lot of cases at least, concerned about. Reality is not to be confused with the meaning that is made of it, because it would be a mere category mistake. However, it is not either “beyond” it. It is sometimes that for which we have no meaning – we just do not know what to do about it – and sometimes it is exactly what we mean. But, even in the latter case, it is not just the same as the meaning that captures it, nor for all that less real than in the case we are short of meaning for it.

As a matter of fact, the false problem of the “transcendence” of reality results from that mistaken perspective according to which reality should be or not *in front* of our meaning. On such view, since it is not always clear whether meaning has a “counterpart” – as, on the same view, reality seems to be such counterpart, when there is one – it is needed that, sometimes, as it were, the experienced reality exceeds the meaning we are able to provide for it, as some kind of proof of the existence of reality in front of meaning.

Now, the fact that, sometimes, we are short of meaning for some things does not prove anything about an intrinsic

transcendence of those things to meaning (in general), but just that so far we have not been able to mean them. This is a point about our meaning, not about the things. Conversely, the fact that sometimes we might doubt whether there is really or not anything “in front” of our meaning, is a point about this meaning as such: it just indicates that, in those cases, we were not able to build a meaning that refers, thus, in some sense (if we consider a rather central use of “meaning” at least), any meaning at all. It is not that, in front of our meaning, something would be really lacking, but the defect is in our meaning itself.

So, realism about meaning just requires us to forswear that kind of “frontal” perspective. What is at issue is much more our capacity to build one take on reality – which is at least one dimension, or one use of what is usually called “meaning”. Now, this is something that is done only in reality itself. Meaning is nothing that would refer to reality and succeed or fail in doing so “from outside”: either success or failure can happen only within the realm of reality. Meaning itself, as a mere take on something, that takes it to be this or that, is nothing real. However, as much, and even more as it is in a lot of cases about reality, it always supposes reality as its basis and the space of its conditions. Because we cannot mean anything but *from somewhere* – and, as far as we can standardize this somewhere and typify those conditions, they always remain real. When analysing a meaning, one should always pay as much attention to what it *supposes* to be real – that is to say the reality on which it rests and that makes it possible as the meaning it is – as to what it *claims* to be real. Reality is as much upstream as downstream of meaning.

That is the point about *context*. One more time, context is not as much an external constraint on meaning as if reality, so to speak, struck meaning from outside, as meaning’s being effectively rooted in reality, and something about the constitution of meaning itself. If meaning does not have to “make contact” with reality, it is because it is already engaged in it, as a real normative move within the space of reality, that is to say, a concrete way, in a definite situational framework – which can be more or less abstract – to have a take on some

definite piece of reality. One can mean something to be so and so only if, in the background, some things are what they are – being what they are that would be in turn characterized, *in other takes*, as being this or that, but of which it is important that, in the very same take, it remains blind, mere “reality”.

So, there is decidedly something misleading in some common way to formulate the realist stance nowadays: as if the problem were to proclaim some counterpart for our meanings, that might be missing, whereas the real issue is to see how reality constitutes the body of those very meanings, how the latter are just built within the former, as some kind of normative takes on itself, and how, on the other hand, wherever they are effective, they are just *per se* contact with that reality. Once understood what are the *real conditions and purport* of meaning, the epochal worry about the capacity of our meaning to reach a reality turns out to be a worry about our meaning much more than about whether things exist or not in front of it. The problem is: when are we *really meaning*? That is to say, as well: when are we really *in our meaning*? The doubt about our capacity to mean anything real is, at bottom, a doubt about our capacity to mean. As it is a question intrinsic to meaning why one should ever mean.

## REFERENCES

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