

Paul Guyer, Rolf-Peter Horstmann,
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In their volume *Idealism in Modern Philosophy*, Paul Guyer and Rolf-Peter Horstmann engage with the notion of idealism within the history of philosophy from the 17th to the early 21st century. The work thereby is presented as a revision and expansion of the “Idealism” entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. The central purpose of the book is not to consider “epistemological and ontological idealism as two distinct forms of idealism”, but rather to articulate the distinction between “metaphysical and epistemological *arguments* for idealism”, whereby idealism refers to the idea that “everything that exists is in some way mental” (p. 3). According to Guyer and Horstmann, this is a distinction that has not always been made clearly (p. 6).

Therefore, the volume includes and examines epistemological and ontological arguments for idealism that have been accepted even by positions that did not identify themselves as idealist. Moreover, according to the authors, the investigation of philosophical perspectives that “either endorse or claim to endorse idealism on ontological and/or epistemological grounds” (p. 5) can be considered through a general distinction of motives for idealism: those based on “self-conceptions”, that is, on “convictions about the role that the self or the human being plays in the world”, and those based on “world-convictions”, namely, “on conceptions about the way the world is constituted objectively or at least appears to be constituted to a human subject” (p. 7). Given the plurality of themes and positions explored, we will attempt to provide a general overview of the main features of the volume in relation to this central task.

In Chapter 2, the book starts with a discussion of Early Modern Rationalism (pp. 15-24). Although none of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, or Malebranche would have identified themselves as idealists, it nevertheless seems possible to

recognize in their perspectives “ontological and epistemological” idealistic motives (p. 16). Descartes and Spinoza offer metaphysical elements for the “adoption of idealism on ontological grounds” (p. 17), although they do not seem to move toward an epistemological argument for it. Leibniz’s position, however, can be read as a “forerunner of an ontological argument for idealism that brings an idealist epistemology in its train” (p. 21). Even Malebranche brings epistemological arguments, since “our own idea can apprehend only other ideas, even if imperfectly” (p. 22).

Chapter 3 focuses on Early Modern English Philosophy (pp. 25-46). Hobbes and Locke would not have considered themselves idealists. However, both of their “theories of knowledge or epistemologies” (p. 25), would be taken up by Berkeley. Despite their differences, all those philosophers have attempted to provide an analysis of the constitutive conditions of knowledge in a way that seems to imply an idealism argued on epistemological grounds. Hobbes and Locke propose an “agnostic” (p. 31) attitude toward the metaphysical dimension. Berkeley’s *esse est percipi* takes a further step in this direction, offering both epistemological and metaphysical arguments. Even in Hume, it seems possible to identify an “uneasy compromise” (p. 46) between agnosticism and an epistemologically motivated idealism.

Chapters 4 and 5 (pp. 47-109), respectively dedicated first to Kant and then to Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, constitute the central and most significant part of the volume. The core of Kant’s critical idealism involves “empirical *realism*” and “transcendental *idealism*” combined with “*realism* about the *existence* of things in themselves” (p. 50). Kant thus achieves a complex form of idealism, where this framework, according to which “the most fundamental forms of knowledge ultimately depend on fundamental operations of self-consciousness”, is extended with the account of “freedom of our own intelligible character” and the idea of the “postulate or possibility of rational belief in if not theoretical knowledge of an intelligent, therefore mind-like, ground of nature itself” (p. 68). The role of the Kantian legacy for Classical German Philosophy will thus lie in the ongoing dialogue with an idealism that “reduces space and time to mere appearance” and “both denies and assumes the possibility of knowledge of things as they are in themselves” (p. 69).

Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel deal with the Kantian perspective through the elaboration of different models of rationality or, as described by Guyer and Horstmann, “dynamic conceptions of idealism” (p. 83). In this period, idealism started to become a “hybrid’ position” (p. 83), which closely relates epistemological and ontological elements. With Fichte’s “ontology of pure action”, grounded in the self-positive activity of I, it is no longer possible to think of “realism as a position that is opposed to idealism” (p. 83). Schelling adopted this view by articulating it within an idealistic version of a “monist ontology” (p. 83) intended to provide a more complete account of nature. Starting from the idea of “original unity” or “primordial totality of opposites” (p. 84), he will later develop his system as a dynamic whole in which is given the epistemological and ontological unity “of the absolute-ideal or subjectivity and the absolute-real or objectivity” (pp. 85-86). Finally, with Hegel comes the attempt to “transcend any traditional form of idealism that identifies the fundamental level of reality exclusively with the subject or mind” in the act of “pure activity of knowing” (p. 86). Hegel will develop a transition from epistemology to metaphysics, thanks to ontological arguments that the reality of objects is not reduced to “subjective conceptual constructions” (p. 100). The world thus corresponds to the self-realization process of objective conceptual thinking itself, into a “robust new idealism based on dynamic principles of world-constitution that are found in the activity of thinking itself” (p. 108). Therefore, Hegel’s thought seeks to recover an argument for the “sole reality of thinking” (p. 102) that can combine both epistemological demands and its ontological commitment, within a perspective in which both dimensions can no longer be conceived in their opposition.

As Chapter 6 explores (pp. 110-124), two responses to these conceptions are represented by Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. While moving from “epistemological motivation for any form of idealism” (p. 111), Schopenhauer comes to an ontological conclusion, namely, that the ultimate character of reality is “fundamentally non-rational” (p. 114). Even in Nietzsche, it is possible to recognize a form of epistemologically motivated idealism. Indeed, his critique seems to contrast with the view that we should conceive reality “not only dependent on but

ultimately constituted by the respective perspectives on or the respective ways of interpreting what we encounter” (p. 117).

Chapter 7 is devoted to English and American Idealism (pp. 125-149). If Bradley and McTaggart present a “mental or spiritual monism”, on the other hand, Royce and Green embraced more “nuanced positions, not excluding the existence of matter from their idealisms” (p. 126). Green proposes an epistemological argument for idealism, where knowledge consists “in a grasp of an order that is itself mental”, compatible with an ontology that is not strictly “mentalistic” (p. 129). Although he had developed epistemological arguments for a “holistic version of metaphysical idealism” (p. 132), Bradley was ultimately driven toward idealism by ontological premises. McTaggart’s “spiritual idealism” (p. 137) does not exclude epistemological realism. Further, Royce argued that epistemology should lead to a metaphysical-ontological idealism through a self-representative essence of mind (p. 142). In contrast, Peirce was led from metaphysical realism to metaphysical idealism, thus endorsing an “epistemological ground” for idealism (p. 143).

As presented in Chapter 8 (pp. 150-158), these efforts were widely criticized by Russell and Moore’s so-called “revolt against idealism” (p. 158). It is interesting to notice that here, too, it is possible to find elements that refer to epistemological motivations for idealism. Indeed, if idealism is meant as “the claim that what we regard as objects of knowledge depends strongly on some activity of the knowing subject” (pp. 157-158), then both Moore and Russell belong to some extent to this view.

Chapter 9 (pp. 159-173) focuses on Neo-Kantianism, which, in “accepting material reality and rejecting the reduction of all reality to anything mental” (p. 161), combines the epistemological premises of idealism with the rejection of its metaphysical commitment. This dualism marks the positions of Dilthey, Windelband, Rickert, or even Cassirer. Underlying this framework is the distinction between the description of nature as an object “ontologically distinct from our representations” and the description of “ourselves and our cultural products in terms of our experience of them”, within a fundamental structure of description that is “in fact furnished by the human mind” (p. 161).

Chapter 10 (pp. 174-202) offers a broad overview of the Twentieth Century. It examines philosophers who “were influenced by idealist epistemology” and some “outliers who were actually willing to identify themselves as metaphysical idealists” (p. 177), such as Carnap, Goodman, Kuhn, Putnam, Quine, Blanshard, Foster and Sprigge. In other contexts, we can find the “life philosophy” (p. 182) later developed by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. In the final sections, the volume explores Wittgenstein’s position (pp. 184-193), as well as Sellars’ confrontation with Kantian epistemology and McDowell’s examination of Hegelian metaphysics (pp. 194-202).

In conclusion, Guyer and Horstmann’s volume highlights the ambiguity revolving around the notion of idealism by moving within various historical-philosophical horizons. While in some respects the metaphysical thesis of idealism that reality is “ultimately mental” doesn’t appear “very promising” (p. 203), epistemological arguments seem to be “inescapable” (p. 204). The crucial aspect of this passage depends mainly on how we can interpret the elaboration that Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel propose of the Kantian legacy. Beyond the examination of each perspective, the main merit and most original feature of the proposal should be found in the specific critical perspective through which this issue is examined. In this sense, the assumption of a distinction between epistemological and ontological arguments allows the volume to include positions that are not strictly identified as idealistic.

The merit of the volume, then, is to offer an analysis of the different ways in which various historical-philosophical perspectives dealt with a fundamental question: the structures through which we attempt to comprehend ourselves and our relationship with the world. In this regard, as the authors themselves point out, further inquiry into the notion of ‘mental’ would turn out to be productive. In order to investigate the semantics of idealism, there is an element that could be emphasized and further explored: the relevance of F.H. Jacobi for the post-Kantian debate, even after 1787, and the presence of other critical perspectives of that period, such as J.F. Fries’ re-elaboration of transcendental philosophy or J.F. Herbart’s realism.

Indeed, it seems that from this aspect may arise the possibility of reflecting on the very notion of idealism, in a way that shows

the implications that the assumption of a dualistic separation between epistemological and ontological motives may entail. However, it is possible to read this aspect as a credit and a suggestion of the contribution, which aims to offer – in a new and broader perspective – the space for a ‘resemantization’ of the concept of idealism.

For these reasons, Guyer and Horstmann’s volume does not represent a mere overview of idealism’s history but a significant contribution to articulate some crucial questions within a new way of understanding the history of philosophy and, above all, to constantly warn thought itself against the risk of its – anti-philosophical – crystallization into given and static oppositions.

Bibliography

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Rolf-Peter Horstmann, *Die Grenzen der Vernunft. Eine Untersuchung zu Zielen und Motiven des Deutschen Idealismus*, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 2004 [1991]

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<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/idealism/>