

Title: *A Real Dialogue on an Ideal Topic*

Background:

The most recent scholarship explores the common ground of idealism, realism, pragmatism by developing an historical perspective. This workshop is conceived within the frame of the course in History of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy taught by Cinzia Ferrini (Department of Humanities) gauged for undergraduates.

Rationale:

The idea of organizing this workshop originates from a set of key dichotomies central to much contemporary philosophical debate, which aims to surmount apparent oppositions. The history of philosophy exhibits a long tradition of ‘idealisms’: beginning with Plato, then passing through early modern times, ending up with Kant’s transcendental idealism and Hegel’s absolute idealism. Recently it has been noted that: “underlying this variety is the claim that reality contains more than matter, but is also constituted by ideas or mental structures”, where it is “an issue for dispute within this tradition whether these ideas are outside and prior to individual minds, whether they only exist in such minds along with reality itself, or whether reality consists in some combination of mind-imposed ideas and mind-independent elements” (R. Stern, *The Idealism & Pragmatism Project*, funded by the Leverhulme Trust (UK), 2012-15). By contrast, the outlook of Pragmatism (with its origins in Peirce and James and antecedents in Reid) can be summarized in Peirce’s ‘pragmatic maxim’: “a conception, that is, the rational purport of a word ...lies exclusively in its conceivable bearing upon the conduct of life” (ibid.).

In this way, pragmatism challenges the empty metaphysical abstractions “of a philosophy that has no relation to our activities within the world” and their practical consequences. In this regard, idealism and pragmatism both appear to be opponents of a third position: realism.

Classical issues about realism are: “in addition to the physical objects and events we perceive, are there also non-physical, and hence non-perceptible forms or ideas of kinds or characteristics, variously instantiated in physical particulars, but which exist independently both of their instances and of what we may happen to say, think, believe or know about them”? (K. Westphal, *Introduction to Realism, Science and Pragmatism*, Routledge 2014).

Does realism contrast to idealism by holding that material objects exist and have mind-independent characteristics? Is perception direct awareness of external objects? Is scientific knowledge about theory-independent phenomena and unobservable entities possible? Are there objective moral values for an agent? Recently, it has been remarked that: “In ontology, realism indicates that one grants extra-mental existence to certain kinds of entities, processes, or structures and at least some of their features, such as physical objects, universals, relations, structures, or propositions. Realism about particular objects and about their features or relations became problematic in Twentieth Century philosophy when it became generally recognized that we cannot, as it were, set aside our concepts, theories, beliefs, or, in general, our language to inspect the fact themselves and on that basis assess our beliefs, statements, or theories about them” (ibid.).

Kenneth R. Westphal, author of *Kant’s Transcendental Proof of Realism* (CUP, 2004) and editor of *Realism, Science and Pragmatism* (Routledge 2014), and the Italian philosopher Paolo Parrini, author of *Knowledge and Reality. An Essay in Positive Philosophy*, (Kluwer 1998) and *Il valore della verità* (Guerini & Ass., 2011), will conduct a ‘real’ dialogue about these ‘ideal’ topics about truth and rationality, the justification of knowledge and the criticism of both metaphysical realism and radical relativism.