



[Etienne Gilson](#) [1]

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Methodical Realism, 1935

In this text, originally presented with the title "Vademecum of the beginner realist" at the end of his work *Methodical Realism*, Etienne Gilson collects in 30 points the main differences between an idealistic and a realistic cognitive approach, showing how realism represents the genuine reference point for all spontaneous knowledge. Idealism, on the contrary, constitutes a forcing and very often prejudicial or ideological position. While the realist chooses to accept reality, thus remaining free in his thinking, the idealist ends up being slave to his own system of thought, in a vain attempt to evade the normativity of the real.

1. The first step on the realist path is to recognize that one has always been a realist; the second is to recognize that, however hard one tries to think differently, one will never manage to,; the third is to realize that those who claim they think differently, think as realists as soon as they forget to act a part. If one then asks oneself why, one's conversion to realism is all but complete.
2. Most people who say and think they are idealists would like, if they could, not to be, but believe that is impossible. They are told they will never get outside their thought and that a something beyond thought is unthinkable. If they listen to this objection and look for an answer to it, they are lost from the start, because all idealist objections to the realist position are formulated in idealist terms. So it is hardly surprising that the idealist always wins. His questions invariably imply an idealist solution to problems. The realist, therefore, when invited to take part in discussion on what is not his own ground, should first of all accustom himself to saying No, and not imagine himself in difficulties because he is unable to answer questions which are in fact insoluble, but which for him do not arise.
3. We must begin by distrusting the term 'thought'; for the greatest difference between the realist and the idealist is that the idealist thinks, whereas the realist knows. For the realist, thinking simply means organizing knowledge or reflecting on its content. It would never occur to him to make though the starting point of his reflections, because for him a thought is only possible where there is first of all knowledge. The idealist, however, because he goes from thought to things, cannot know whether what he starts from corresponds with an object or not. When, therefore, he asks the realist how, starting from thought, one can rejoin the object, the latter should instantly reply that it is impossible, and also that this is the principal reason for not being an idealist. Since realism starts with knowledge, that is, with an act of the intellect which consists essentially in grasping an object, for the realist the question does not present an insoluble problem, but a pseudo-problem, which is something quite different.
4. Every time the idealist calls on us to reply to the questions raised by thought, one can be sure that he is speaking in terms of the Mind. For him, Mind is what thinks, just as for us the intellect is what knows.

One should therefore, in so far as one can, have as little as possible to do with the term. This is not always easy, because it has a legitimate meaning, but we are living at a time when it has become absolutely necessary to retranslate into realist language all the terms which idealism has borrowed from us and corrupted. An idealist term is generally a realist term denoting one of the spiritual antecedents to knowledge, now considered as generating its own content.

5. The knowledge the realist is talking about is the lived and experienced unity of an intellect with an apprehended reality. This is why a realist philosophy has to do with the thing itself that is apprehended, and without which there would be no knowledge. Idealist philosophers, on the other hand, since they start from thought, quickly reach the point of choosing science or philosophy as their object. When an idealist genuinely thinks as an idealist, he perfectly embodies the essence of a “professor of philosophy”; whereas the realist, when he genuinely thinks as a realist, conforms himself to the authentic essence of a philosopher; for a philosopher talks about things, while a professor of philosophy talks about philosophy.

6. Just as we do not have to go from thought to things (knowing that the enterprise is impossible), neither do we have to ask ourselves whether something beyond thought is thinkable. A something beyond *thought* may well be unthinkable, but it is certain that all *knowledge* implies a something beyond thought. The fact that this something-beyond-thought is given us by knowledge only *in* thought, does not prevent it being a something beyond. But the idealist always confuses “being which is given in thought” with “being which is given by thought.” For anyone who starts from knowledge, a something beyond thought is so obviously thinkable that this is the only kind of thought for which there can be a beyond.

7. The realist is committing an error of the same kind if he asks himself how, starting from the self, he can prove the existence of a non-self. For the idealist, who starts from the self, this is the normal and, indeed, the only possible way of putting the question. The realist should be doubly distrustful; first, because he does not start from the self; secondly, because for him the world is not a non-self (which is a nothing), but an in-itself. A thing-in-itself can be given through an act of knowledge. A non-self is what reality is reduced to by the idealist, and can neither be grasped by knowledge nor proved by thought.

8. Equally, one should not let oneself be troubled by the classic idealist objection to the possibility of reaching a thing-in-itself, and above all to having true knowledge about it. You define true knowledge, the idealist says, as an adequate copy of reality. But how can you know that the copy reproduces the thing as it is in itself, seeing that the thing is only given to you in thought. The objection has no meaning except for idealism, which posits thought before being, and finding itself no longer able to compare the former with the latter, wonders how anyone else can. The realist, on the contrary, does not have to ask himself whether things do or do not conform to his knowledge of them, because for him knowledge consists in his assimilating his knowledge to things. In a system where the bringing of the intellect into accord with the things, which the judgment formulates, presupposes the concrete and lived accord of the intellect with its objects, it would be absurd to expect knowledge to guarantee a conformity without which it would not even exist.

9. We must always remember that the impossibilities in which idealism tries to entangle realism are the inventions of idealism. When it challenges us to compare the thing known with the thing in itself, it merely manifests the internal sickness which consumes it. For the realist there is no “noumenon” as the realist understands the term. Since knowledge presupposes the presence to the intellect of the thing itself, there is no reason to assume, behind the thing in thought, the presence of a mysterious and unknowable duplicate, which would be the thing of the thing in thought. Knowing is not apprehending a thing as it is in thought, but, in and through thought, apprehending the thing as it is.

10. To be able to conclude that we must necessarily go from thought to things, and cannot proceed otherwise, it is not enough to assert that everything is given in thought. The fact is, we do proceed otherwise. The awakening of the intelligence coincides with the apprehension of things, which, as soon as they are perceived, are classified according to their most evident similarities. This fact, which has nothing to do with any theory, is something that theory has to take account of. Realism does precisely that, and in this respect is following common sense. That is why every form of realism is a philosophy of common sense.

11. It does not follow from this that common sense is a philosophy; but all sound philosophy presupposes common sense and trusts it, granted of course that, whenever necessary, appeal will be made from ill-informed to better-informed common sense. This is how science goes about things; science is not a critique of common sense but of the successive approximations to reality made by common sense. The history of science and philosophy witness to the fact that common sense, thanks to the methodical use it makes of its resources, is quite capable of invention. We should, therefore, ask it to keep criticizing its conclusions, which means asking it to remain itself, not to renounce itself.

12. The word “invention,” like many others, has been contaminated by idealism. To invent means to *find*, not to *create*. The inventor resembles the creator only in the practical order, and especially in the production of artifacts, whether utilitarian or artistic. Like the scientist, the philosopher only invents by finding, by *discovering* what up to that point had been hidden. The activity of his intelligence, therefore, consists exclusively in the exercise of his *speculative* powers in regard to reality. If it creates anything, what it creates is never an object, but a way of explaining the object from within that object.

13. This is also why the realist never expects his knowledge to engender an object without which his knowledge would not exist. Like the idealist, he uses his power of reflection, but keeping it within the limits of a reality given from without. Therefore the starting point of his reflections has to be being, which in effect is for us the beginning of knowledge: *res sunt*. If we go deeper into the nature of the object given us, we direct ourselves towards one of the sciences, which will be completed by a metaphysical of nature. If we go deeper into the conditions under which the object is given us, we shall be turning towards a psychology, which will reach completion in a metaphysics of knowledge. The two methods are not only compatible, they are complementary, because they rest on the primitive unity of the subject and object in the act of knowledge, and any complete philosophy implies an awareness of their unity.

14. There is nothing, therefore, to stop the realist going, by way of reflective analysis, from the object as given in knowledge to the intellect and the knowing subject. Quite the contrary, this is the only way he has of assuring himself of the existence and nature of the knowing subject. *Res sunt, ergo cognosco, ergo sum res cognoscens* [Things exist, therefore I know, therefore I am a knowing subject]. What distinguishes the realist from the idealist is not that one refuses to undertake this analysis whereas the other is willing to, but that the realist refuses to take the final term of his analysis for a principle generating the thing being analyzed. Because the analysis of knowledge leads us to the conclusion “I think,” it does not follow that this “I think” is the first principle of knowledge. Because every representation is, in fact, a thought, it does not follow that it is only a thought, or that an “I think” conditions all my representations.

15. Idealism derives its whole strength from the consistency with which it develops the consequences of its initial error. One is, therefore, mistaken in trying to refute it by accusing it of not being logical enough. On the contrary, it is a doctrine which lives by logic, and only by logic, because in it the order and connection of ideas replaces the order and connection between things. The fatal leap (*saltus mortalis*) which catapults the doctrine into its consequences precedes the doctrine. Idealism can justify everything

with its method except idealism itself, for the cause of idealism is not of idealist stamp; it does not even have anything to do with the theory of knowledge; it belongs to the moral order.

16. Preceding any philosophical attempt to explain knowledge is the fact, not only of knowledge itself, but of men's burning desire to understand. If reason is too often content with summary and incomplete explanations, if it sometimes does violence to the facts by distorting them or passing them over in silence when they are inconvenient, it is precisely because its passion to understand is stronger than its desire to know, or because the means of acquiring knowledge at its disposal are not powerful enough to satisfy it. The realist is just as much exposed to these temptations as the idealist, and yields to them just as frequently. The difference is that he yields to them against his principles, whereas the idealist makes it a principle that he can lawfully yield to them. Realism, therefore, starts with an acknowledgement by the intellect that it will remain dependent on a reality which causes its knowledge. Idealism owes its origin to the impatience of a reason which wants to reduce reality to knowledge so as to be sure that its knowledge lets none of reality escape.

17. The reason idealism has so often been in alliance with mathematics is that this science, whose object is quantity, extends its jurisdiction over the whole of material nature, in so far as material nature has to do with quantity. But while idealism may imagine that the triumphs of mathematics in some way justify it, those triumphs owe nothing to idealism, they are in no way bound up with it, and they justify it all the less, seeing that the most mathematically oriented physics conducts all its calculations within the ambit of the experimental facts which those calculations interpret. Someone discovers a new fact and what happens? After vain attempts to make it assimilable, all mathematical physics will reform itself so as to be able to assimilate it. The idealist is rarely a scientist, more rarely still a research scientist in a laboratory, and yet it is the laboratory that provides the material which tomorrow's mathematical physics will have to explain.

18. The realist, therefore, does not have to be afraid that the idealist may represent him as opposed to scientific thought, since every scientist, even if philosophically he thins himself an idealist, in his capacity as a scientist thinks as a realist. A scientist never begins by defining the method of the science he is about to initiate. Indeed, the surest way of recognizing false sciences is by the fact that they make the method come first. The method, however, should derive from the science, not the science from the method. That is why no realist has ever written a *Discourse on the Method*. He cannot know how things are known before he knows them, nor discover how to know each order of things except in knowing it.

19. The most dangerous of all the different methods is the "reflective method"; the realist is content with "reflection." When reflection becomes a method, it is no longer just an intelligently directed reflection, which it should be, but a reflection which substitutes itself for reality in that its principles and system become those of reality itself. When the "reflective method" remains faithful to its essence, it always assumes that the final term of its reflection is at the same time the first principle of our knowledge; as a natural consequence of this it follows that the last step in the analysis must contain virtually the whole of what is being analyzed; and, finally that whatever cannot be discovered in the end point of the reflection, either does not exist, or can legitimately be treated as not existing. This is how people are led into excluding from knowledge, and even from reality, what is necessary for the very existence of knowledge.

20. There is a second way of recognizing the false sciences generated by idealism; in starting from what they call thought, they are compelled to define truth as a special case of error. Taine did a great service for good sense when he defined sensation as a true hallucination, because he showed, as a result, where logic necessarily lands idealism. Sensation becomes what a hallucination is when this hallucination is not one. So we must not let ourselves be impressed by the famous "errors of the senses," nor startled by the

tremendous business idealists make about them. Idealists are people for whom the normal can only be a particular instance of the pathological. When Descartes states triumphantly that even a madman cannot deny his first principle “I think, therefore I am”, he helps us enormously to see what happens to reason when reduced to this first principle.

21. We must, therefore, regard the arguments about dreams, illusions, and madness, borrowed by idealists from skeptics, as errors of the same kind. The fact that there are visual illusions chiefly proves that all our visual perceptions are not illusions. A man who is dreaming feels no different from a man who is awake, but anyone who is awake knows that he is altogether different from someone who is dreaming; he also knows it is because he has had sensations, that he afterwards has what are called hallucinations, just as he knows he would never dream about anything if he had not been awake first. The fact that certain madmen deny the existence of the outside world, or even (with all due respect to Descartes) their own, is no grounds for considering the certainty of our own existence as a special case of “true delirium.” The idealist only finds these illusions so upsetting because he does not know how to prove they are illusions. The realist has no reason to be upset by them, since for him they really are illusions.

22. Certain idealists say that our theory of knowledge puts us in the position of claiming to be infallible. We should not take this objection seriously. We are simply philosophers for whom truth is normal and error abnormal; this does not mean it is any easier for us to reach the truth than it is to achieve and conserve perfect health. The realist differs from the idealist, not in being unable to make mistakes, but principally in that, when he does make mistakes, the cause of the error is not a thought which has been unfaithful to itself, but an act of knowledge which has been unfaithful to its object. But above all, the realist only makes mistakes when he is unfaithful to his principles, whereas the idealist is in the right only in so far as he is unfaithful to his.

23. When we say that all knowledge consists in grasping the thing as it is, we are by no means saying that the intellect infallibly so grasps it, but that only when it does grasp it as it is will there be knowledge. Still less do we mean that knowledge exhausts the content of its object in a single act. What knowledge grasps in the object is something real, but reality is inexhaustible, and even if the intellect had discerned all its details, it would still be confronted by the mystery of its very existence. The person who believed he could grasp the whole of reality infallibly and at one fell swoop, was the idealist Descartes. Pascal, the realist, clearly recognized how naïve was the claim of philosophers that they could “comprehend the principles of things, and from there – with a presumption as infinite as their object – go on to knowing everything.” The virtue proper to the realists is modesty about his knowledge, and even if he does not practice it, he is committed to it by his calling.

24. A third way of recognizing the false sciences which idealism generates is by the fact that they feel it necessary to “ground” their objects. That is because they are not sure their objects exist. For the realist, whose thought is concerned with being, the Good, the True and the Beautiful are in the fullest sense real, since they are simply being itself as desired, known and admired. But as soon as thought substitutes itself for knowledge, these transcendentals begin to float in the air without knowing where to perch themselves. This is why idealism spends its time “grounding” morality, knowledge and art, as though the way men should act were not written in the nature of man, the manner of knowing in the very structure of our intellect, and the arts in the practical activity of the artist himself. The realist never has to ground anything, but he has to discover the foundations of his operations, and it is always in the nature of things that he finds them: *operatio sequitur esse*.

25. So we must carefully avoid all speculation about “values,” because values are simply and solely transcendentals that have cut adrift from being and are trying to take its place. “The grounding of values”

is the idealist's obsession; for the realist it is meaningless.

26. The most painful thing for a man of our times is not to be taken for a “critical spirit.” Nevertheless, the realist should resign himself to not being one, because the critical Spirit is the cutting edge of idealism, and in this capacity it has the characteristics not of a principle or doctrine but of zeal for a cause. The critical spirit expresses, in effect, a determination to submit facts to whatever treatment is necessary so that nothing in them remains refractory to the mind. To achieve this, there is only one policy; everywhere the point of view of the observer must be substituted for that of the thing observed. The discrediting of reality will be pursued, if necessary, to its most extreme consequences, and the harder reality resists, the more determined the idealist will be to disregard it. The realist, on the other hand, should always recognize that the object is what causes knowledge and should treat it with the greatest respect.

27. Respecting the object of knowledge means, above all, a refusal to reduce it to something which complies with the rules of a type of knowledge arbitrarily chosen by ourselves. Introspection, for instance, does not allow us to reduce psychology to the level of an exact science. This, however, is not a reason for condemning introspection, for it seems probably that, the object of psychology being what it is, psychology ought not to be an exact science, not at least if it is to remain faithful to its object. Human psychology, such as a dog knows it, ought to be at least as conclusive as our science of nature; just as our science of nature is about as penetrating as human psychology as known by a dog. The psychology of behavior is therefore very wise to adapt the dog's outlook on man, because as soon as consciousness makes its appearance, it reveals so much to us that the infinite gulf between a science of consciousness and consciousness itself leaps to the eye. If our organism were self-conscious, who knows whether biology and physics would still be possible?

28. The realist must, therefore, always insist, against the idealist, that for every order of reality there is a corresponding way of approaching and explaining it. He will then find that, having refused to embark on a critique preliminary to knowledge, he is free – much freer than the idealist – to embark on a critique of the different branches of knowledge by measuring them against their object; for the “critical spirit” criticizes everything except itself, whereas the realist, because he is not a “critical spirit,” is continuously self-critical. The realist will never believe that a psychology which in order to understand consciousness better starts by placing itself outside consciousness, will give him the equivalent of consciousness; nor will he believe with Durkheim, that the real savages are those found in books, or that social life consists essentially of prohibitions with sanctions attached, as though the only society we had to explain were the one described in Leviticus. Nor will he imagine that historical criticism is in a better position than the witness it invokes to determine what happened to them or discern the exact meaning of what they themselves said. That is why realism, in subordinating knowledge to its objects places the intelligence in the most favorable position for making discoveries. For if it is true that things did not always happen exactly as their witnesses supposed, the relative errors they may have made are a trifling matter compared to those our imaginations will embroil us in if we start reconstructing facts, feelings and ideas we never experienced, according to our own notions of what seems probable.

29. Such is the liberty of the realist. We can only choose between deferring to the facts and so being free in thought, or being free with the facts and the slave of thought. So let us turn to the things themselves which knowledge apprehends, and to the relationship between the different branches of knowledge and the things which they apprehend, so that, conforming itself ever more closely to them, philosophy can progress once more.

30. It is this spirit, too, that we should read the great philosophers who have preceded us on the realist

path. "It is not in Montaigne," wrote Pascal, "but in myself that I find everything I see within." And we can equally say here; "it is not in St. Thomas or Aristotle, but in things, that the true realist sees everything he sees." So he will not hesitate to make use of these masters, whom he regards solely as guides towards reality itself. And if the idealist reproached him, as one of them has just had the kindness to do, with "decking himself out in hand-me-downs taken for truths," he will have his answer ready: much better to deck oneself out in truths which others have handed down, as the realist, when necessary, is willing to do, rather than, like the idealist, refuse to do so and go naked.

E. Gilson, *Methodical Realism*, Engl. transl. by Philip Trower (Front Royal: Christendom Press, 1990), pp. 127-145.

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