

Symposium: Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl's *The Realist Turn: Repositioning Liberalism*

Concepts and Natures: A Commentary on

The Realist Turn

David Kelley

The Atlas Society

In *The Realist Turn*,¹ along with their previous books and many articles, Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl have developed a systematic philosophical case for liberty. It is systematic in grounding the institutions of a free society in principles of natural rights, which they derive in turn from substantive claims in moral theory, epistemology, and metaphysics. They differ in this respect from the more popular trend among political philosophers who prefer to untether their views from such substantive claims; instead basing their accounts on more formal or constructivist approaches..

The ethical basis for rights, they say, is the moral theory they describe as “individualist perfectionism”:

Individualist perfectionism is a neo-Aristotelian ethical theory in which the actualization (or perfection) of individualized human nature is foundational to a description of human good and moral obligation. *Eudaimonia*—human flourishing—is the ultimate good or *telos* (end) for human beings; and living in a

¹ Douglas B. Rasmussen and Douglas J. Den Uyl, *The Realist Turn: Repositioning Liberalism*, (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020). Henceforth, TRT. All parenthetical citations in the text are to TRT unless otherwise specified.

practically wise (*phronesis*) and virtuous manner is the primary obligation required by that end (p. 32).

Unlike other moral philosophers in the Aristotelian tradition, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, their view of flourishing is individualistic. While it involves many social goods in the form of relations of many kinds, flourishing is agent-relative—my flourishing is a good for me, yours for you—and cannot be maximized across individuals (p. 34). It includes goods and virtues that are “both worthy in themselves and nonetheless done for the sake of human flourishing” (p. 35). This moral standard is objective: while the specific nature of flourishing depends on the unique characteristics of an individual person, the basic principles are universal and based in human nature. Flourishing “is a way of living that is not reducible merely to our attitudes, feelings, conventions, or mental (or social) constructions” (p. 37).

This moral theory raises the question of how a political-legal system that governs a society universally can be consistent with the agent-relativity and uniqueness of flourishing for each individual. The authors refer to this as “liberalism’s problem” (p. 27 and *passim*), and it’s a major reason why political philosophers, including libertarians, have shied away from basing their views on definite moral foundations. The authors’ solution relies on their view that flourishing involves self-direction through the exercise of reason, which takes effort and will. “[S]elf-direction is not merely one of the many conditions necessary for the existence of human flourishing; rather, it is fundamental to the very nature of human flourishing” (pp. 39-40). Natural rights function politically as “metanorms” to protect the exercise of self-direction against coercive interference.

Such, in briefest outline, is the moral and political philosophy the authors have developed in previous works, and they reprise it in the first five chapters of *The Realist Turn*. But the *raison d’être* of this book is to go deeper: to make a case for natural rights and individualist perfectionism as objective truths, based on a realist epistemology. They spell out these views in considerable detail, and along the way deal with a wide range of other classical and contemporary views. One can disagree with specific elements in their view—I have doubts about flourishing as an ultimate value, for example, as I have written

elsewhere.² But I salute their efforts to ground their defense of liberty in a systematic philosophy with a foundation in ethics, and both in a view of human nature and human knowledge.

The case for realism occupies the final two major chapters in the book, dealing respectively with realism in ethics (Chapter 6) and knowledge (Chapter 7). In both cases, the authors' primary target is the pragmatist constructivism of Hilary Putnam (and to a lesser extent Willard Quine and Richard Rorty)—and the views of John Dewey and Ludwig Wittgenstein that these recent philosophers invoke. As an epistemologist, I will devote this commentary chiefly to Chapter 7, “On the Alleged Demise of Metaphysical Realism.” As an Objectivist epistemologist, moreover, I will note similarities and differences between the Objectivist version of realism and the one that Rasmussen and Den Uyl put forward. Although the authors identify with the Thomist-Aristotelian tradition, they are familiar with Ayn Rand's epistemology, which is also Aristotelian in a broad sense. Comparing these sibling approaches will bring out a number of more specific questions and concerns to complement the broader differences with constructionism.

In section 2, I will discuss their case for metaphysical realism as such. In section 3, I will turn to the core of their defense, a theory of concepts and universals. Before we begin, though, we should consider briefly the connection between rights and realism.

1. Rights and realism

The principle of natural rights is a political thesis; realism is a metaphysical and epistemological thesis. How are they related? At a superficial level, there's a plausible connection. The authors hold that the rights we have are based on our nature, in light of the perfectionist requirements of our nature, which in turn depends on our cognitive ability to grasp natures.³ But they also acknowledge that metaphysical realism does not entail natural rights. Metaphysics is a descriptive

² David Kelley, “Why Virtue is a Means to Our Ultimate End,” in *Is Virtue Only A Means To Happiness? An Analysis of Virtue and Happiness in Ayn Rand's Writings*, ed. William Thomas, The Atlas Society, 2001/2010.

³ See TRT pp. 142-146.

branch of philosophy. Natural rights, and their ethical basis, are normative theses that need support from a normative theory of values.

What about the converse implication: Does the thesis of natural rights depend on metaphysical realism? The authors say it does:

For if there was no such thing as a defensible realism generally, and of realism with respect to normative concepts in particular, the case for natural rights does indeed fall apart...

So considered, human nature is the stable object of our cognition across cultures and indeed times, which is, of course, vital to any account of natural goodness and natural rights (p. 144, p. 213).

This dependence is the fundamental point in “the realist turn” that the authors defend. But it is a trickier issue. Any ethical or political theory claims, at least implicitly, that it has some sort of objective basis, by some standard of objectivity, even if that basis is convention or a contract theory. In that respect, one could question the authors’ claim. On the other hand, any alleged conventional basis for normative claims is wide open to views incompatible with a politics based on individualism and individual rights. So I’m inclined to agree with the authors about this direction of dependence. In any case, I think realism in metaphysics and epistemology is worth defending in its own right. So let us move on to that defense.

2. Realism

What is metaphysical realism?

Metaphysical realism involves both an ontological thesis and an epistemological thesis. The ontological thesis is that there are beings that exist and are what they are independent of and apart from anyone’s cognition. The epistemological thesis is that the existence and nature of these beings can be known, more or less adequately, sometimes with great difficulty, but still known as they really are (p. 188).

This definition nicely captures the essence of realism across its many specific forms, from Aristotle to contemporary realists. It is the thesis that Rand called the primacy of existence: Things exist in a world

that is independent of our conscious awareness. Things are what they are, they have identities, regardless of whether or not we know about them, regardless of what we believe or feel. Facts are facts. But we can acquire knowledge of facts. The function of the mind, of our conscious capacities, is to grasp things as they are.⁴

Constructivism is a form of the opposing thesis, the primacy of consciousness—in this case the beliefs and practices of a group rather than individual subjectivism. The authors' definition:

Epistemically, constructivism holds that our beliefs are true or false only because they are based on principles that are ultimately grounded in our thoughts and practices, not on the nature of cognitive-independent things such as human nature... (p. 187).

The corresponding ontological claim is

... that the natures of cognitive-independent beings are either constructions of or projections from human thoughts and practices. This claim is generally expressed in terms of the conceptual scheme or language or conventions employed by the knower, or the points of view or interests, or even more generally, the cultural background of the knower (or some combination of them all) (p. 188).

How then does one make a case for realism? Rasmussen and Den Uyl claim that it is self-evident (p. 218). I agree. They do not offer a systematic account of self-evidence, but they do cover all elements of such an account. In this section I will pull those elements together, with a bit of elaboration, to show why their case for realism is persuasive.

A self-evident proposition is one justified by the direct awareness of the fact that makes it true, rather than by inference from other facts. Two types of proposition meet that standard: perceptual judgments and axiomatic truths like the law of identity—and the primacy of existence. In a perceptual judgment, we predicate a concept

⁴ Ayn Rand, "The Metaphysical Versus The Man-Made," *The Ayn Rand Letter*, Vol. II, No. 12 March 12, 1973. See also David Kelley, *The Evidence of the Senses* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), pp (27 ff).

of an object we perceive. I see the sheet of paper and judge that it is white; both the awareness of the paper and of its color are direct. I take the authors to be making the same point in their critique of the constructivist claim that all perception is theory-laden:

The ultimate bases for concept formation are things and their properties. Our sense perceptions of these things and their properties result in preconceptual or prelinguistic sorting of them on the basis of their perceived similarities and differences (p. 220).

To be sure, perceptual judgments are fallible. If the conditions of perceptual are distorted, or misleading in some other way, I could be wrong. But in normal circumstances my application of the concept is justified by the direct awareness not only of the object itself but of its determinate color. There is no inference involved.⁵

Perceptual judgments lie at the basis of all human knowledge. (The authors agree with Aristotelian empiricism in holding that all knowledge derives from the senses (p. 80, pp. 219-20). Axiomatic truths lie at the other extreme, as the most abstract and fundamental level of knowledge. The laws of identity and non-contradiction, for example, apply to every object of knowledge, known or yet to be discovered; and to everything we know or could know about them. I take it that the authors consider realism to be self-evident in this sense.

For realism to meet the standard of a self-evident proposition, it must be validated by the direct awareness of the fact that makes it true. In the case of perceptual judgments, the direct awareness is obvious. In the case of realism, it takes a bit more thought. In any case of knowledge from simple perception to the most complex knowledge of the world, we are aware of something—an object, a society, a law of physics—something that exists and is what it is; and we know this by reflecting on that awareness. The essential point is that conscious awareness is relational. As the authors explain:

Though each of these tools [concepts, propositions, and arguments] has different cognitive functions from the others,

⁵ I provide an account of how perceptual judgments are justified by perceptual awareness in *Evidence of the Senses*, Chap 7.

their common fundamental character consists in their being of or about something other than themselves.... They are inherently relational or intentional and cannot be known first (either logically or temporally), before it is known what they are of or about (p. 214).⁶

Two points should be noted here. First, this is not an argument for realism. It points to a fact about cognition in general and asks the reader to observe the same fact and recognize its truth in his own mental functioning.⁷ Axiomatic truths, like perceptual judgments, are justified by direct awareness, not inference. Secondly, this realist insight excludes the representationist view that cognition is mediated by an inner object—an image or sense-datum in the case of perception, an idea in the case of conceptual knowledge. That is the point of the authors' statement that the tools of cognition "cannot be known first (either logically or temporally), before it is known what they are of or about." They elaborate on this point elsewhere in arguing that a concept is not a "third thing" standing between knower and known. Concepts "are not what know but that by which we know" (p. 206).

Axiomatic truths, then, are justified in the same way as perceptual judgments, by the direct awareness of the fact they state. That is the positive side of their justification. But there is also a negative, polemical case. Unlike perceptual judgments, axiomatic truths are not fallible. We could not be mistaken, for example, about the laws of identity and non-contradiction. How would we even understand a claim that there are exceptions to these laws? Do the exceptions have an identity? Are they both exceptions and not exceptions? These laws of logic lie at the base of all knowledge. Denying them is incoherent; anyone who tries to deny them implicitly refutes himself by using them.

⁶ Or, as Ayn Rand put it, "A consciousness conscious of nothing but itself is a contradiction in terms: before it could identify itself as consciousness, it had to be conscious of something." *Atlas Shrugged*, Centennial Edition (New York: Plume, 2005), p 1015.

⁷ Cf. TRT, 220: "So, the principle of non-contradiction is implicitly grasped in sense perception in the following way: the child's awareness that she cannot have her cake now that she has eaten it involves grasping the constituents that are to be used in forming the concept of impossibility; and that concept will be a constituent later used in grasping the principle of non-contradiction.

Rasmussen and Den Uyl mount the same self-refutation arguments on behalf of realism.

In simplest form, if someone claims that a statement is true because he believes it, one can ask whether that claim—“statements are true because I believe them”—is itself true only because he believes it, or does he intend it as a truth about the real, objective nature of cognition—in which case the content of his statement is inconsistent with his intent in making the statement. Arguments of this form can be mounted not only about truth but about other terms of epistemic appraisal such as evidence, meaning, and reference. The authors spend some time mounting self-refutation arguments about all these terms, hunting down constructivists in the tall grass of their attempts to get around the problem.

I do not consider these self-refutation arguments as *arguments* for realism (or for the laws of logic). If these truths are self-evident, they are not derived from other truth known antecedently. And the self-refutation arguments presuppose realism; treating them as arguments would be circular reasoning. What they do show is that the axiomatic truths are inescapable as foundations for any knowledge we may claim to have. They complement the positive validation—the direct awareness that all cognition is relational—by providing dialectical tools to help focus attention on that fact.

What I have outlined is the case that Rasmussen and Den Uyl make for realism, and I think it’s a solid case. Despite their efforts to present the case in detail, however, and to answer a wide range of possible objections, they recognize that there’s more work to do. The self-refutation arguments in particular are certainly not new. They are at least as old as Plato’s attack on Protagoras in the *Theaetetus*.⁸ In my experience, they rarely persuade anti-realists. The reason may be that realism as such is a highly abstract tenet, applicable to all forms of cognition. But each form of cognition has specific issues about its objectivity—from the validity of the senses, to the nature and basis of

⁸ Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. John McDowell (Oxford, 1973), 170a-171d. Aristotle seems to be making a similar argument, in a more complicated form, in *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in Richard McKeon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York, 1941), Book IV, Chaps. 4-8.

abstract concepts, to the problem of induction, to mention a few. Realists need to address these specific issues. Rasmussen and Den Uyl take on the issue of concepts in the central section of their chapter on metaphysical realism.

3. Concepts

The authors recognize that validating the objective basis of concepts is essential to defending realism. The human ability to form and use concepts is the core of rationality, the basis of language, science, and politics and law—including the principle of rights. The authors offer a theory of concepts which they describe as a “Neo-Aristotelian-Thomistic View of Concepts and Cognition.” To set the stage for discussing this view, I’ll begin by explaining what I take to be the philosophical issue.

The problem of concepts has been an issue in metaphysics and epistemology since Plato; it was better known historically as the problem of universals—and that’s a good place to start. A concept like *cat* is universal. It refers indifferently to an open-ended range of beings, not merely my cats and other cats I have seen but all the cats there are in the world, past, present, and future. While individual cats are similar, moreover, they differ along every dimension, from size to color to temperament to hunting skills, among many other attributes. A concept like *cat*, in other words, is abstract as well universal. It is universal because it subsumes an open-ended range of *numerically* distinct things. It is abstract because it subsumes a range of *qualitatively* distinct things: things that are similar but differ qualitatively. When I say of my pet Isabella that she is a cat, I am predicating of her exactly the same thing I would mean in identifying any other animal as a cat, despite the many differences among these creatures.

Assuming that all things existing outside the mind are concrete individuals, with their individual concrete attributes—an Aristotelian view that Rasmussen and Den Uyl accept, as do I—the problem of concepts is that of explaining how the use of universal and abstract concepts is justified as a cognitive tool for identifying these particular individuals. The authors reject Platonic extreme realism, which holds that concepts refer to universals existing *ante rem*, in a realm outside the world of the particulars that instantiate those universals. Instead, they

adopt “a version of what is traditionally called ‘moderate realism’” (190), the view usually attributed to Aristotle and developed further by Aquinas. Before we consider their theory in detail, it will be useful to consider two other theories as contrast objects. The first is a version of moderate realism they do *not* accept; the second is the Objectivist theory.

Moderate realists hold that universals do not exist apart from particulars, and do not exist in particulars, either—not literally, not *as* universals. What exist outside the mind are particular things, with their concrete, numerically discrete attributes and natures. But some moderate realists hold that these attributes and natures do contain a kind of abstractness. The leaves of the plants on my shelf are different shades of green. What makes them all green is the possession of that color property, which makes them similar, together with a determining element that makes them different shades. We form the concept *green* by distinguishing the abstract property from the differentiating element. In the same way, we form the concept of a kind, like *man*, by distinguishing the nature that makes an individual person human from the specific differences that make him qualitatively different from other humans. The abstract property or nature, as it exists in the things themselves, is only a potential universal. But once we have isolated it, we can see that it is common to many other things, predicable of many things, and so on. We now have a concept that results from our own cognitive activity but is grounded in reality. The universality of the concept has an objective basis in reality, even though it does not correspond to anything that exists as universal apart from the mind. But this is possible only because the abstractness of the concept does correspond to it—it mirrors—something that exists as abstract apart from the mind. This version of moderate realism is typically described as holding that abstract properties exist *in re*.

In re realism faces both ontological and epistemological problems. The ontological question concerns the status of the attributes or natures in individuals. If there is an abstract element existing in things as they are, apart from the mind, how does that abstract element relate to the differentiating element that makes each particular object and its particular attributes or nature determinate? In the Aristotelian tradition, that individuating role was sometimes assigned to matter, as opposed to

form, in the hylomorphic view of ontology. Among the scholastics and later thinkers, that role was often assigned to individualizing or determinate “notes” that, for example, makes one of my plants its distinctive shade of green, another plant a different shade; or makes me a specific, determinate instance of the nature *man*, different as an individual from other people. Peter Coffey put it this way:

The absolute nature or object signified by “man” is really in this, that, and the other individual man, in John and James and Thomas, etc. It is really in them, but, of course, with this difference in each, that it has in each individualizing characteristics which are not included in it as it is when considered in itself, in its abstract condition as an object of thought, apart from the singulars of which it is predicated. In any individual man there are *individualizing notes* that are not in the abstract thought object “man”; but there is nothing in the latter that is not in the former.”⁹

On this view, the abstract attribute or nature cannot exist in things apart from the determining note in those things. And that raises the epistemological question: In what sense can the abstract and determining elements be distinguished? How do we abstract the general attribute or nature from the individualizing element in a particular thing? Some realists seem to hold that we attend selectively to the general attribute or nature, attending to the general element as opposed to the determining notes, as we might attend selectively to the color of an object as opposed to its shape. But abstracting the general property green from two specific shades of green is not like abstracting one specific property from another. As Hume argued,

‘tis evident at first sight, that the precise length of a line is not different nor distinguishable from the line itself; nor the precise degree of any quality from the quality.¹⁰

If we ignore the respect in which two shades of green differ, do we find in the leaves of my plants an abstract greenness? Or have we ignored

⁹ CF. Peter Coffey, *Epistemology* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1958), vol I, pp 274-75 (emphasis added)

¹⁰ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969/1739), I,1,vii., p 66.

their color attribute entirely? If we ignore the differences between me and other human beings, differences not only in accidental properties but in properties essential to being human—e.g., my degree of intelligence, the particular content of knowledge I have acquired, my cognitive style, and other dimensions of rationality—are we left with an abstract property of rationality that is qualitatively the same in me and all other human beings? Or have we ignored my rational faculty altogether? It is not enough to say that we can distinguish in thought between things that cannot exist separately. That's true of the color and shape of an object. But in that case we can conceive of and describe the two attributes individually. How would we describe the differentiating note in a concrete shade of green as opposed to its greenness?

Such are (some of) the difficulties faced by *in re* realism. Consider, by contrast, Rand's Objectivist theory. On that theory, the ontological basis of a concept like *green* is the fact that certain colored things—the leaves of my plants, to use that example—differ quantitatively in color. Each leaf is what it is, with the specific color it has. There is nothing abstract in that identity. But there are relations of similarity and difference among colored things—relations that are themselves concrete and determine—such as the similarity between the different shades of green in my plants. These shades can be put in order as specific measurements on the dimension of color, from yellowish green to bluish, say, or deeper green to lighter. The basis for the concept *green* is that the difference in measurements of those leaves are much less than their differences in color from things like the plants' red flowers or brown stems. In the same way, the basis for the concept *man* is that the differences among human beings, along the countless dimensions on which they vary, are less than their differences from cats, apes, or beetles.

The epistemology of concept-formation is based on that ontology. The differences among the similar things we categorize under a concept are differences in specific measurements along a dimension of similarity. The abstract attribute or kind that a concept identifies is really the set of determinate relationships among determinate characteristics that allow objects to be ordered quantitatively. Concept-formation is then the cognitive act of omitting those measurements, within the range of quantitative differences among objects we have grouped together as

similar—such as the leaves of my plants, or the human beings I know—by contrast with qualitatively different things—such as brown chairs in the case of color, or the family dog or cat in the case of humans. Once we omit the measurements among the specific objects whose similarity we perceive, the concept is open to anything else that is similar to them. Thus the concept we form is abstract and universal in subsuming an open-ended range of particulars, but its objective content is neither universal nor abstract; its content is those particulars, isolated by the similarity they have in virtue of their determinate characteristics. And, as Rand notes, a concept embodies the “some but any” principle:

Bear firmly in mind that the term “measurements omitted” does not mean, in this context, that measurements are regarded as non-existent; it means that measurements exist, but are not specified. That measurements must exist is an essential part of the process. The principle is: the relevant measurements must exist in some quantity, but may exist in any quantity. ¹¹

The theory of concepts that Den Uyl and Rasmussen outline has similarities to and differences from both of the contrast theories I have sketched. At the core of their theory is a distinction between two modes of abstraction. On the one hand, we may abstract one thing from another, A from B, to focus just on A to the exclusion of B. Using terms from Aquinas, the authors describe this as “abstraction with precision.” It is the mode of abstraction referred to earlier, the *in-re* realist view that we can attend selectively to a general element in a thing as opposed to the determining notes, as we might attend selectively to the color of an object as opposed to its shape. By contrast, “abstraction without precision” is abstracting an attribute or nature without including the specific, individuating forms it takes in particular things but recognizing that the attribute or kind exists only in those individuating forms.

Thus, when we consider in similar manner the natures of individual human beings, say Barack Obama, Donald Trump,

¹¹ Ayn Rand, *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology* (New York: NAL Books, 1990), p. 13. See also David Kelley, “A Theory of Abstraction,” *Cognition and Brain Theory* 7 (1984), pp 329-57 [The Atlas Society, Objectivist Studies Book 5, <https://shop.atlassociety.org/collections/ebooks/products/a-theory-of-abstraction-objectivist-studies-book-5>

Bill Clinton, and Socrates, we are considering their natures indeterminately (that is, without regard to their specific determination), as a conceptual unit or universal but we know nonetheless that their natures must have some determination (p. 209).

In light of that distinction, they claim that the concept *man* identifies the nature human beings share without denying or disregarding the fact that the nature exists only in concrete forms in individual humans with all their variety. As the authors put it,

the characters of each of the things that are grasped in abstraction as one common character (that is, as a universal) only exist in reality in an individualized manner.... the universal signifies indeterminately what is common to the respective natures of individual beings that is exhibited determinately in each (p. 211).

Thus, in a formulation the authors use often, “the nature of a human being either exists thoroughly individualized in cognitive-independent reality or universalized in cognition” (p. 212).

That formulation captures one aspect of concept-formation: Concepts are universal in referring to (an open-ended range of) individual things. But concepts can have this universal character only because of another aspect: They abstract from the determinate nature of particulars. How is that possible? Objects have determinate attributes and natures, whereas concepts identify those attributes and natures in abstract form. What exactly is the determinate element in objects that we abstract from in forming a concept? And what cognitive process is involved in abstraction? To see the issue, consider what is involved in grasping the determinacy of a particular thing and its features. When I perceive a green object by itself, I am aware of a color property which is in fact determinate. Insofar as my perceptual awareness is specific to the color, I could in a sense be said to be aware of its determinacy. But that could not be said in any full-bodied sense, because I am not aware of it *as* determinate. Determinate—as opposed to what? Until I form the abstract concept green, I don’t yet have any grasp of the contrast *determinate vs. abstract*. How do I get there? Rasmussen and Den Uyl give the start of the answer: “The nature of a thing only becomes

universal [and presumably abstract] in virtue of its being compared and contrasted to the natures of other existents and thus viewed in certain real relationships among them” (p. 220) They go on to say that those real relationships are relations of similarity.

So far, so good. The role of similarity, in forming concepts directly from the perceptual awareness of particulars, is common to all three theories we have discussed. And that leads to the next and crucial question: How does the awareness of similarity alter and enlarge our awareness of the determinacy of things and features in such a way as to enable us to abstract? Both in-re realism and the Objectivist theory can answer this question. For in-re realism, similarity reveals the differences among the determining notes of similar things, allowing us to distinguish those notes from the common abstract quality or nature—perhaps by a direct (intuitive) grasp. On the Objectivist view, similarity is a quantitative relationship; grasping the determinate features as differences in measurements allows us to abstract by omitting those measurements. I don’t see a comparable level of explanation in the authors’ presentation.

To put this point in a different way, the idea of abstraction without precision is parallel to Rand’s “some but any” principle.¹² But that principle needs an answer to the question “some but any *what?*” Rand’s answer is, “some but any measurement.” An in-re realist’s answer could be, “some but any determining note.” As far as I can see, however, Rasmussen and Den Uyl do not have an alternative answer. The idea of abstraction without precision is a good first-pass description of the cognitive process. So far, however, we have only a re-description of what is to be explained, not a real explanation.

Of course, providing anything like a complete theory of concepts would take a much longer work, as the authors acknowledge. They also refer briefly to Rand’s theory and my elaboration of it as relevant to “a well-developed theory of abstraction,”¹³ which suggests that they may think the Objectivist theory can be incorporated within

¹² Rasmussen noted the parallel in a talk to the Ayn Rand Society: Rasmussen, “Rand and Aquinas on the Problem of Universals,” 2004 (unpublished).

¹³ TRT, p. 217, n 81.

their version of moderate realism. But I doubt that that would be possible because of a further element in their theory that I can mention only briefly here. They invoke another use of abstraction without precision, pertaining not to the relation between an abstract concept and its determinate instances, but to the existence of a nature as such, whether it exists in things or in the mind.

When one absolutely considers the nature of a human being, one abstracts but does not prescind from every mode of existence that nature might have—that is, fundamentally speaking, from how it exists individualized and determinately in cognitive-independent reality and from how it exists universally and indeterminately in human cognition....

Such a consideration is indifferent to how that nature exists—namely, individually and determinately in cognition-independent reality or universally and indeterminately in cognition.... (pp. 212-13)

This claim reflects a Thomist refinement of the Aristotelian idea that, in cognition, the knower's mind takes on the form of the thing known. This idea is common among moderate realists in that tradition. But it seems to assert a kind of mirroring of nature that I reject. I mention the claim because it seems an essential element in the authors' view of concepts and universals – and one at odds with the Objectivist account. But it is too fundamental and complex an issue to discuss here.¹⁴

Most of the points I have made about moderate realism were discussed in depth by scholastic philosophers and other thinkers in the Thomist-Aristotelian tradition. Rasmussen and Den Uyl are deeply versed in this literature, and I doubt that anything I have said will come as a surprise to them. So I leave my comments as questions and concerns for further discussion. At the same time, I suspect that many potential readers of *The Realist Turn* who have an interest in epistemology will have questions like mine. However, the authors' treatment of realism, especially the section on moderate realism, is couched almost entirely in the framework of Thomist-Aristotelian thought: actuality and

¹⁴ See my discussion of the diaphanous model of cognition in *Evidence of the Senses*, pp. 37-43, including the brief comment on Aristotle, p 38, n. 44.

potentiality, immanent activity, form and matter, etc. Which raises the question: Who is the intended reader? In other chapters, the authors have extended discussions of other approaches, including many contemporary theories. In their chapter on realism, however, after the discussion of Putnam and constructivism, they stay within the framework of Thomist-Aristotelian thought, with no outreach to thinkers who do not share this framework. Concepts have been an active topic of research in cognitive science, with many philosophers now involved. They could have been an interested audience, but with their account so fixed in the Thomist-Aristotelian tradition I suspect that many will not make the effort.

4. Conclusion

In my critique of the theory of concepts presented in *The Realist Turn*, I have focused on the core issues of abstraction. I consider these issues to be most important of all the metaphysical and epistemological problems that anti-realists have raised about cognition. Rasmussen and Den Uyl have much more to say, however, about conceptual knowledge, including definitions, fallibility, the foundations of knowledge in perception, and concepts for imaginary objects like unicorns, to mention a few. These are insightful discussions that do much to bolster the case for realism and reveal the errors of anti-realism.

I have also tried to show (Section 2) how their defense of realism in general is successful, based on the relational character of all awareness as well as self-refutation arguments against anti-realism.

I have not discussed in any depth their earlier chapters on natural rights or the ethics of flourishing. But as a fellow advocate of rights, reason, and realism, I salute the authors' commitment to grounding political philosophy in fundamentals. Making systematic connections among the different branches of philosophy is an important standard for philosophical work. In *The Realist Turn*, Rasmussen and Den Uyl provide a model of what that standard looks like in depth and detail.