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**First Principles: What Are They And Who Needs Them ?  
(Or, Is Critical Realism An Underlabourer Or Overseer ?)**

**(first draft)**

### **Introduction**

My task in this paper is to offer a quick overview of realism, meaning metaphysical realism and critical realism, and to address some critical points. The title of the paper indicates that nature of my concern, which is to argue that realist ontological arguments are needed to guide social science methods, and to inform political arguments, contrary to the claims of critics, that realist argument are either empty or attempts to gain some form of absolutist knowledge. In short, I will argue that realism can be an underlabourer, and that it does not try to become some absolutist overseer. Another way of putting this is to say that social research requires some guiding first principles, and that we can use realism to supply such principles, and this does not entail

### **(1) Metaphysical Realism: God's Eye View, Useful Presupposition Or Necessary Presupposition ?**

Not much is said about metaphysical realism in the work of critical realists, but as it is a necessary presupposition for critical realism and, further, as many people hostile to critical realism conflate metaphysical realism with what may be called a 'meta-theoretical' realism, then something needs to be said about metaphysical realism. Perhaps the best way to start is with a definition, as it seems that much philosophical dispute can be generated by semantic misunderstandings, with the protagonists arguing past one another. By metaphysical realism I simply mean the claim that there is a reality independent of our perspectives of it (which is not to say that we and our perspectives are not part of reality).

Such a view has been attacked by neo-Wittgensteinian pragmatists such as Putnam and Rorty. For Putnam and Rorty, metaphysical realism is the search for a God's eye view. That is to say, it is the search for some form of aperspectival 'Archimedean point' where not only is a direct access to reality possibly but a direct access to the whole of reality. Thus Rorty refers to realism as the search for a 'skyhook' which will pull us out of our socially and historically contingent perspectives. Similarly, but more colourfully, Putnam describes the metaphysical realist as an 'evil seducer' of an 'innocent maiden', who tells the said innocent that unlike the non-realist, the metaphysical realist can guarantee the existence of everyday objects such as tables and chairs and, having won the confidence of the maiden, then proceeds to tell her (over breakfast no less) that we cannot know what exists until a finished science furnishes us with a catalogue of facts. Until that day, the

metaphysical realist says, we cannot know what reality is and, as that day will never come, the maiden has, in Putnam's words, 'been had'.

Putnam's alternative is 'internal realism'. He argues that Kant was the first internal realist, because Kant recognised that we impose our stamp on the object of knowledge (a point implicitly made before Kant, in the attempt to separate primary and secondary qualities, which let the cat out of the bag so to speak, as all qualities are 'secondary'). Putnam then argues that Wittgenstein deflated Kant by putting the emphasis on practices. That is, instead of the transcendental idealist claim that the condition of possibility for knowledge was a fixed set of 'categories', Wittgenstein's philosophy held that there were a plurality of perspectives, with meaning being connected to use. So we move from the view that knowledge is mediated via categories to the view that knowledge is contingent upon specifically situated perspectives. Similarly Rorty claims we should reject the representationalist problematic (which means realist and anti-realist arguments), shifting our attention from arguments about how we may or may not represent reality as it 'really is', to the anti-representational problematic, which is concerned with practices. (One difference between Rorty and Putnam, which is worth noting here, is that whereas Putnam cites Kant as being partially correct, Rorty regards all epistemologists as misguided, and hence his argument for a shift to the anti-representational problematic, which focuses solely on practices, whilst internal realism seems to some extent to be concerned with more 'formal' propositions about meaning. In later work though Putnam says he is going to try to be more Wittgensteinian by avoiding 'philosophical problems').

As Searle argues though metaphysical realism, or 'external realism' in his argot, is not an epistemic thesis. It is not a thesis about knowing but about being. In which case metaphysical realism cannot be accused of seeking a God's eye view, because it is not concerned with some epistemic claim about knowing reality, let alone knowing reality *in toto*. This is not to say that ontological considerations debar epistemological considerations, for Searle adds that he accepts the correspondence theory of truth, although he also accepts that thesis of conceptual relativity which holds that knowledge is situated within a perspective. The point about conceptual relativity does not negate Searle's claim to accept the correspondence theory of truth, as the correspondence theory of truth is taken to be *definition* of truth and not a *criterion* of truth (meaning it does not hold that linguistic propositions must be isomorphs of non-linguistic facts). Propositions are true if they correspond to reality, so conceptual relativism is not the same as epistemological relativism, or truth relativism, but truth is mediated via some perspective.

Although Searle does not cite Popper there is a similarity, which is that Popper's arguments for verisimilitude are based on the same notion of correspondence. That is, for Popper, verisimilitude defines truth as correspondence to reality, but propositions can only approximate to reality, so there is no direct access to the facts. The problem with Popper though is that he, unlike Searle, does not think that metaphysical / external realism is a necessary presupposition. Whereas I would argue that metaphysical realism is a necessary presupposition to avoid epistemological relativism (after all, if conceptual relativity is cut loose from metaphysical realism, then conceptual schemes become self-

referential, and so truth is wholly relative to – i.e. reducible into – conceptual schemes), Popper thinks that metaphysical realism is only a psychological presupposition.

Popper thinks it is more ‘useful’ to accept metaphysical realism than its antithesis idealism (and, we may add epistemological relativism), but nevertheless, metaphysical realism cannot be a necessary presupposition. Whilst Popper differed from the Vienna Circle by not regarding metaphysics as meaningless nonsense (he even recognised that scientific theories may have metaphysical components), he sought to demarcate science from non-science by holding that science concerned empirical testability, in which case the metaphysical thesis of metaphysical realism was to be demarcated from – i.e. kept out of – scientific method. We may turn to metaphysical realism for psychological reassurance that science is about something – and, indeed, we may have to do this to avoid the conceit that the world is what we think it is because we think of it in a particular way – but this is not the foundation for empirical methods. Hence the problem that verisimilitude gets cut off from metaphysical realism.

For all the ink that has been spilt in the war against positivism, it has, I conjecture, been misguided to claim Popper is a positivist on the basis of his advocacy of the D-N (deductive-nominalist) method. To be sure this, along with falsifiability, makes reference to the occurrence of observed regularities, or failed occurrence of conjectured regularities. However, Popper does not think such observation gives us a direct access to the laws of nature in themselves (he rejects the notion of decisive falsification, making him a bit more Lakatosian than may usually be thought), saying that: (a) speculation (i.e. metaphysical speculation) about reality-in-itself will not help science, which depends upon the constant development of fallible / falsifiable conjectural perspectives; and (b) that sensory ‘immediacy’ is far from sufficient a basis for knowledge.

But now I am starting to digress. The main point here is that Popper accepted metaphysical realism, but argued that it ought to be regarded as a psychological presupposition. I disagree because if any notion of fallible knowledge, verisimilitude or conceptual relativity is cut off from metaphysical realism then propositions and conceptual schemes become self-referential. Therefore I would argue that metaphysical realism has to be argued for as a transcendental argument: the condition of possibility for knowledge is an acceptance of metaphysical realism. In other words, metaphysical realism is a necessary philosophical presupposition and not a psychological presupposition. In which case, it is slightly misguided to read Popper as a positivist, on the basis of his advocacy of the D-N method when he is really a form of neo-Kantian, who cuts empirical methods off from metaphysical arguments about reality external to our knowledge claims.

One could though argue the converse of the claim about absolute knowledge, saying that such an ontology does not work as it actually tells us nothing specific about reality. Or, at the very least, it only tells us what to avoid. So, for instance, Trigg publishes widely on science and religion, arguing that relativism is incoherent and that we need metaphysical realism to make sense of science and religion, but he fails to move beyond this negative view of what we ought not do. He also gets into a bit of a tangle because he conflates any

reference to perspectival knowledge with wholesale epistemological relativism, leaving us with the conclusion that either no knowledge is possible; or that we have a direct access, which goes against his metaphysical claim that as being is independent of, or separate from knowing, it cannot be known directly, as that defines ontology to fit epistemology. Trigg never addresses this issue, preferring to leave epistemological matters to others, and so at the end of his Aristotelian Society address (which criticised Putnam for being a relativist), he says that the task of saying how knowledge is possible is to be left to those dealing with epistemology. It hard to see what is left for any epistemologist to argue though, if any reference to perspectives is rejected together with the notion we have a direct access to the truth. Thus if we accepted Trigg's philosophy we would be facing the problem that such a realism gives us nothing positive to say about reality, and thus adds grist to the mill of those who would regard metaphysical realism as 'empty' and useless. It tells us what to avoid, and then paints itself into a corner. (It may be argued that Trigg, in *Reason and Commitment* argues that we need reasons for scientific and religious beliefs, but this argument is along the lines of: the relativist argument from commitment to reason is wrong so the inverse causal chain is correct; and this is a *non sequitur*).

Against this we can argue that whilst metaphysical realism *qua* metaphysical argument has no empirical propositions, and as an ontological argument it says nothing about how we may gain knowledge, such a metaphysical assumption is implicit within any knowledge claim. Consequently, knowledge claims would be a nonsense without presuming the metaphysical argument that there is a reality external to our representations, which our representations may approximate to. We may agree with Popper that one must accept either metaphysical realism or the converse metaphysical thesis of idealism, but say that this is a necessary philosophical presupposition, rather than a psychological presupposition. This is because without such a metaphysical presumption about reality existing separately from our representations of it, knowledge would not be possible. This is very similar to Popper's argument, although Popper's argument that metaphysical realism is a psychological presupposition has the unfortunate consequence of making reality depend upon our whim, and thus his argument for realism is subject to the some of the same criticisms he levels against idealism. So, whilst a metaphysical argument about reality gives us no substantive and specific empirical claims about reality, together with no epistemological doctrine about how knowledge is possible, metaphysical realism is necessarily presupposed by knowledge claims about the world.

## **(2) Critical Realism And The Natural Sciences**

So far I have been concerned with ontology at a metaphysical level. I have been concerned with the metaphysical argument that being is separate from our representations, and with denying the mutually exclusive criticisms of metaphysical realism as seeking a God's eye view or being empty and useless. Now I want to shift the concern to ontology at the level of meta-theory. What I mean by meta-theory is a general theory which supplies some precepts to guide empirical investigation into the natural and social world. We can start to understand the critical realist meta-theoretical ontology as follows. Critical realists make a distinction (and here I am initially thinking of the natural

world) between the empirical (experiences), the actual (events), and the real (experiences, events and mechanisms). Mechanisms have causal powers and exist beneath the level of observable events, so mechanisms are not directly manifest to experience. If we took a positivist / empiricist view of the natural world then the real would be conflated into the actual which would be conflated into experience: to experience an observable regularity would be to experience directly a causal law. Such a positivist conception of nature leads to a specious inductive method which received a rebuttal with Popper's famous argument about black swans.

Underlying the problems with the inductive method (and deductive methods too) is what realists refer to as the 'epistemic fallacy'. The epistemic fallacy concerns the attempt to pose ontological issues within epistemological terms of reference. Such reasoning is fallacious because it turns upon an illegitimate reduction of ontology into epistemology. Positivist models of natural science are based upon the epistemic fallacy because epistemological considerations about *how* knowledge is constituted are used to define *what* exists and *how* it can be known. Thus the epistemological premise about knowledge being derived from experience leads to a definition of causal laws as observable constant conjunctions and a methodology which presumes the existence of constant regularities and which turns upon inductivism or deductivism. Note that in his *Realist Theory Of Science* Bhaskar talks of 'empirical realism', meaning both positivism and neo-Kantian views of science, which both turn upon the epistemic fallacy and 'actualism'.

Empirical realism not only tries to describe how science operates, it also seeks to be an underlabourer. That is to say, empirical realism tries to prescribe what methods science ought to use. In doing this empirical realist philosophy ends up as what I would call an 'overseer', meaning that instead of trying to guide scientific method, the philosophy seeks to make the method mirror the philosophy. A prior conviction about the philosophy of mind (i.e. a prior conviction about epistemology) lead to a dogmatic attempt to legislate on the methods of the natural science, with the result that the method could not explain the realm of the real. The world was cut to fit a subject-centred epistemology, but such cutting removed the real from methods.

Bhaskar does not try to begin from some pure starting point. Unlike subject-centred epistemologies, such as rationalism and empiricism, which start with metaphysical speculation about the 'mind' which is removed from practices and a socio-historical location, Bhaskar starts from 'where we are'. That is, Bhaskar starts by accepting that scientific practices 'work', and then he moves to an immanent critique of empirical realist conceptions of natural science. Here Bhaskar argues that empirical realism cannot say how science works because the observed regularities which may obtain in a controlled experiment do not obtain in the realm of the real. Outside the artificial closure of the experiment, and in the openness of the natural world, different unobservable causal mechanisms interact in contingent and changing ways, which is why we cannot base methodology on observed constant conjunctions. The point here then is that if empirical realism cannot say how science operates, because it cannot take putative knowledge of causal laws from the closed experiment to the open world of nature, then we need to

move beyond the realm of the empirical and the actual, and postulate the existence of unobserved causal mechanisms existing beneath the level of experienced events.

In developing this ontology Bhaskar also talks of 'emergent properties'. Emergent properties are entities which are created by the interaction of other entities and which then have causal powers in their own right. For example, water is an emergent property of hydrogen and oxygen. The notion of emergent properties is used to further develop a stratified ontology. It is not just that the world is divided into underlying phenomena and actual epiphenomena, but that the objects of science, meaning the underlying phenomena, are also stratified, so that, for instance, we can move from the biological and chemical realms into the realms of physics, and ultimately down to debates about 'superstrings'. In postulating such a stratified ontology, Bhaskar is seeking to avoid the view that there are fixed essential properties that directly correlate with caused epiphenomena.

So, to recap quickly, Bhaskar starts from where we are, which is that he accepts that scientific practices work. He then presents an immanent critique of empirical realism, which tries to present philosophy in an underlabouring role for the sciences but ends up dogmatically using philosophy as an overseer for the sciences. Here methodology is defined to fit epistemology, and this turns on the epistemic fallacy with ontological issues being defined via epistemological terms of reference. The result is not only a logic fallacy (the epistemic fallacy), but also methodology which is untenable because the inductive or deductive method which presumes fixed constant conjunctions cannot be applied outside the condition of artificial experimental closure to the real world which is open. From this immanent critique Bhaskar switches the attention from epistemology to ontology. He develops a stratified ontology of natural being, making a distinction between the empirical, the actual and the real. The level of the real includes the empirical and the actual together with underlying generative mechanisms (which are emergent properties).

From this ontology, Bhaskar (1998:129) suggests what he calls the RRRE methodology of: resolution (of a complex event into its causes); redescription (of component causes); retrodiction (to possible antecedent causes of components); and elimination (of alternative possible causes of components). The basic point here is that scientific knowledge has to make conjectures about the existence of underlying generative mechanisms. Such conjectures are always fallible because, *contra* subject-centred epistemology, there is no direct access to a manifest truth. Thus scientific knowledge is always part of the 'transitive' realm, whilst nature itself is the 'intransitive realm'.

The ontological principles set out above, of underlying generative mechanisms (*qua* emergent properties) existing in open systems, supply the precepts to guide science (using the RRRE method). Hence realism is a meta-theory, as it is to be used to guide the formation of specific theories and empirical research. It is therefore an ontological underlabourer which, unlike epistemological underlabouring, does not become an overseer.

### **(3) Some Problems ?**

The argument developed by Bhaskar is a transcendental argument concerning the condition of possibility of natural science. Bhaskar is arguing that the condition of possibility for natural science is that science seeks out (fallible) knowledge of underlying generative mechanisms. This means that Bhaskar is open to the charge of tautology. It may be objected against Bhaskar that emergent properties in open systems are the condition of possibility of science because science seeks knowledge of emergent properties in open systems. Against this, Bhaskar argues that he has not dogmatically defined the problem to fit an answer, but that he developed an immanent critique of empirical realist conceptions of science and, as these conceptions failed according to their own criteria to account for the actual practice of science (as the closed systems model does not apply to the world outside the experiment), then an alternative had to be developed which would try to respond to these shortcomings. Such an alternative could then make the claim that it, unlike empirical realism, could account for the condition of possibility of science. Here then we may talk of 'transcendental realism' as critical realism is fulfilling a transcendental role and, according to Bhaskar, doing so in a non-circular fashion. Rather than define the activity to fit the posited condition of possibility, the practice of science is compared to empirical realist terms of reference, and as these fail to account for how science works, an attempt to address those shortcomings is better placed to explain scientific practice.

However, a pragmatist like Rorty would argue that if science works then that is all we need to know, or rather accept, and if we try and develop grand philosophical accounts of how and why this is possible (such as transcendental realist arguments), then we are engaging in fatuous 'methodolatry'. A practice can only be explained as a practice and not by some grand scheme about how reality can be represented in itself if only we get the right method. Moreover, if one moved from subject-centred epistemologies to immanent critique in order to derive one's philosophical principles then, and this is to move beyond the points made by Putnam and Rorty, one may not logically claim to be developing a method about the world anyway. It could be argued that all one has done is say why previous theories are incorrect, which is not sufficient to establish the veracity of any replacement. One would have rejected a metaphysics of mind but then come to rely on it by saying that as its epistemology is wrong, an alternative ontology must necessarily be right; and this, it may be objected, is a *non sequitur*. In other words, without the metaphysics of mind foil the realist ontology could not be developed let alone advocated.

Such a conclusion about the deriving of a transcendental realist ontology from an immanent critique of subject-centred epistemologies being a *non sequitur* would obviously lend support to the pragmatist case against methodolatry. If subject-centred epistemologies tried to start with some 'first principles' and then move on to say how knowledge was possible, and these positions were rejected for entailing the epistemic fallacy, then the attempt to avoid such first principles by starting with an immanent critique, which could only establish a negative case against subject-centred epistemology, and not a positive case for transcendental realism, would be sufficient to show the paucity of methodolatry. Nothing would explain practices except practices. We could say whether practices worked or not but we could not say why they worked by turning to the

first principles of subject- centred epistemologies or the immanent critique advocated by transcendental realism.

Such a critique could continue by noting that as Bhaskar rejected the correspondence theory of truth he would be left with two options *viz.* pragmatism and some form of relativism. Bhaskar is obviously not a pragmatist, and his argument for epistemic relativity may seem to push him into accepting some form of truth relativism. Bhaskar may reject the notion of truth relativism, but he holds to what he calls ‘epistemic relativity’, meaning that all truth claims are made from within some perspective (i.e. the transitive realm is constituted by (fallible) perspectives). Now whilst perspectives are meant to link up to an external reality, in denying the correspondence theory of truth, Bhaskar’s position ends up as truth relativism, with the transitive realm being cut free from the intransitive realm. In this case, the resulting relativism would negate the possibility of science, as science would not be able to acquire knowledge (fallible or otherwise) about a reality external to perspectives. Therefore it would seem as though pragmatism were justified because now we were dealing with ‘theory’ which was not a useless attempt at methodolatry, but ‘theory’ which negated the practice of science.

Such criticisms can be addressed though and we need not embrace pragmatism. Against the latter point concerning truth relativism we can say that we ought to accept the correspondence theory of truth, or at least one version of it. We could say that correspondence is a *definition* and not a *criterion* of truth, so correspondence does not (*pace* Bhaskar, Putnam, and Rorty) entail a direct access to the facts, with propositions somehow being linguistic isomorphs of non-linguistic facts. Making such a point means that we can embrace metaphysical realism too, and reconnect the transitive to the intransitive realm. We can say that perspectives may correspond to reality (albeit in fallible ways) and so now epistemic relativity would not result in truth relativism and would presuppose metaphysical realism.

Now, turning to the former issue, concerning the charge of methodolatry, we can note the following in defence of transcendental realism. To start this defence we can start with a distinction between: (a) Bhaskar’s argument (*Realist Theory of Science*, and *Possibility of Naturalism*) that the object of enquiry always sets certain limits upon the range of possible descriptions; and (b) Rorty’s argument that, contrary to idealism, there is something real beyond a language game, but that an object can only cause us to hold certain beliefs given a prior agreement on a language game, and that it cannot suggest beliefs for us to hold (‘Texts and Lumps’ in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* p.83). Rorty’s argument is premised upon the epistemic fallacy. What exists is defined in terms of how we may know it, with our ‘knowledge’ being determined by the language game we are situated within. This is a collectivised version of the epistemic fallacy. Unlike subject-centred epistemologies, which talk about knowledge in terms of the individual’s mind, Rorty is talking about collective language games. This results in the ‘genetic fallacy’, meaning that the truth of a concept, or its putative truth, is derived from its origin within a conceptual scheme and not from a relationship (of verisimilitude) between concepts and reality. In other words, the result is truth-relativism (which negates science, contrary to the pragmatist acceptance of science) and idealism.

Alternatively the notion that the object of enquiry sets some limits upon how it may be described avoids the epistemic and genetic fallacies. This can be sustained only if we accept the correspondence notion of truth mentioned above. That is, if we say that a perspective may be true if it corresponds to reality, without presuming some relationship of immediacy, then we can accept both metaphysical realism and conceptual relativity. This will then enable us to say that the object of enquiry will set limits upon how it may be described, without presuming a direct access (*contra* subject-centred epistemologies), and without falling into truth-relativism (like Rorty) which denies such powers of objects external to perspectives.

Another point to make, in this defence of realism, is that the perspectives which try to gain truth about an external reality make ontological assumptions (not about the veracity of a metaphysical realist ontology over idealism, but at the level of meta-theory or specific theories), meaning that some form of substantive assumptions are made about being. These assumptions need not be explicitly formulated but they are inescapable. Any perspective will carry within it some assumptions about the object of enquiry it seeks to gain knowledge of. Thus subject-centred epistemologies of empirical realism made ontological assumptions that fitted particular epistemological positions, which resulted in the epistemic fallacy, as ontology was cut to fit epistemology. The result of the epistemic fallacy was that subject-centred epistemologies failed as underlabouring positions, because the methodological prescriptions did violence to the practice of science (by presuming to be an overseer). In other words, the object of enquiry, *viz.*, natural being, set limits upon being described which were violated by the subject-centred epistemologies, that tried to define natural being in terms of what was immediately manifest to human perception.

In this context then immanent critique refers to the practice of showing why a set of perspectives fail, with their terms of reference being inappropriate for the object of study which, in this case, meant showing that empirical realism could not account for the openness of natural being. This is not merely a negative activity then, for one is not saying that the positions criticised are internally incoherent, but that they *fail to be appropriate for the limits on description set by the object of enquiry*. This is implicitly positive because it is incumbent upon one to then develop an alternative which improves on matters, not by gaining a direct access to the facts-in-themselves, but by being a fallible conjecture about being, developed to overcome past shortcomings. Carrying out such an exercise would also not be wholly arcane, as one would be connecting philosophy to the actual practice of science. The way forward as suggested by realists then is to put forward a meta-theory of emergent properties in open systems, arguing that this ought to act as an underlabourer for scientific method, as it makes explicit what seems to be implicit within the very practice of science. The alternative offered by Rorty fails to separate science from non-science, and the claims of empirical realism turned upon fusing meta-theory and the formation of specific theories (developed in empirical research), to force the latter to fit the misguided overseer assumptions of the former.

To summarise then, we need not accept the ‘pure’ first principles that the epistemologies of empirical realism furnished, for these are premised upon the epistemic fallacy, reducing ontology into epistemology, in order to fit a theory of mind. Such a search for pure first principles will necessarily result in an overseer position as any research (meaning any empirical research and the formation of specific theories in empirical research) will be forced to conform to the tenets of the epistemology. This does not mean embracing pragmatism though as that cannot explain science – it seeks to defend science but wilfully lacks the resources to do so. Alternatively critical realism may become a transcendental realism, to explain the condition of possibility of science. Here realism will put forward its case, not by seeking pure first principles, but via an immanent critique of the empirical realist account of science. This practice of immanent critique compares terms of reference to the object of enquiry that sets limits upon description. By building on the short comings of empirical realism, transcendental realism was able to put forward a meta-theory of emergent properties existing in open systems. This meta-theory can act as an underlabourer by supplying some guiding precepts for scientific method. We may say that these precepts are ‘situated first principles’, i.e. they are principles not developed ‘from nowhere’, or from some special insight into how beliefs may mirror non-beliefs, but from immanent critique, and they are ‘first’ in the sense that they logically precede explicit discussions about method (such as the argument that transcendental realism ought to act as an underlabourer), although such principles chronologically post-date the activity of science.

#### **(4) Critical Realism And Social Science**

So far I have endeavoured to argue that metaphysical realism is not based upon some search for a God’s eye view, and that transcendental realist arguments (premised upon what I refer to as ‘situated first principles’) can act as an underlabourer for natural science, without becoming some form of epistemic overseer. In sum, ontological arguments, or at least critical realist ontological arguments, are useful and are not based upon a presumption of epistemological certainty.

Realist arguments were extended from the natural to the social sciences with Bhaskar’s book ‘The Possibility of Naturalism’. Here Bhaskar argued for naturalism, i.e. the unity of method between the social and natural sciences, which meant using the ontology of emergent properties existing in open systems to resolve the structure-agency problematic. The point here being that the notion of emergent properties was used to say how individuals were enabled and constrained by an objectively real social context (i.e. how structure conditioned but did not determine agency); and the notion of open systems was used to argue against prediction and the positivist use of quantitative data (which is not to say that quantitative research and positivism are synonymous).

Such an argument for realism was arrived at via an immanent critique, with perspectives that placed too much emphasis on structure or agency being rejected. The rejection was based on the argument that the terms of reference of such perspectives could not realise their objective, of explaining how individual agents were conditioned by the social context. The argument set out by Bhaskar is rather schematic, but the basic framework he provided was elaborated upon by Archer, in what became a trilogy of texts, *viz.* ‘Culture

and Agency', 'Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach', and 'Being Human: The Problem of Agency'. The ideas in these texts which are most germane to this quick exegesis are that culture is an emergent property as well as material structures, such as capitalist economic relations, and that empirical research needs to be premised upon a social ontology (of structure and agency, defined using the concept of emergent properties). As regards the latter point, Bhaskar may have set out the arguments for linking structure and agency, and done this in the context of arguing that the social and natural sciences ought to have a similar method, but ultimately he did not say much about method. In other words, his discussion of naturalism was based more on the similarity of ontology than the similarity of method. Margaret Archer corrected this by introducing the notion of the morphogenetic model.

Archer's argument is that whilst structure and agency are always interconnected (i.e. agents always exist in some form of social context), in order to study the interplay of structure and agency, we need to make an artificial distinction between structure and agency, which is referred to as an 'analytic dualism' (as opposed to a 'philosophical dualism', which would hold that structure and agency are different essences which cannot interact). Analytic dualism then allows one to study the interplay of structure and agency over time using the morphogenetic method. The morphogenetic method begins with a prior social context (time point one), then it discusses socio-cultural interaction (time points two-three), before moving to say how the social context (at time point four) has changed (morphogenesis) or being reproduced in a very similar fashion (morphostasis). This methodology may be used as an underlabourer to guide the use of qualitative research or the combined use of qualitative and quantitative research. For the use of realism in empirical research see Porter's use of Bhaskar with his ethnographic work on nursing, Willmott's use of Archer in his ethnographic work on schools, together with the development of critical realism as an underlabourer for 'heterodox economics' by Lawson, and Lewis for instance.

Again then we may talk of situated first principles as the realist social ontology is developed from an immanent critique of alternative social ontologies. This may happen to entail naturalism but there is no *a priori* commitment to naturalism. Unlike positivist naturalists, who argue that the social sciences must use the (positivist conception of) natural science method to be 'scientific', realism does not accept the view that one particular method, let alone positivist philosophy, can deliver us the truth. Rather, the argument for naturalism is a contingent outcome of the immanent critique of alternative social ontologies. From such critiques, which fail to do justice to the object of study, we can derive the situated first principles about social reality being constituted by emergent properties (in open systems). To those who would object that actual empirical method needs no ontological underlabourer, it can be replied that, as argued above, any attempt to gain knowledge will be based upon some ontological assumptions, in which case they ought to be explicitly defined and argued for.

##### **(5) What Is Critical About 'Critical Realism'?**

Whilst the 'realist' aspect of 'critical realism' may be clear, nothing has been said yet about the adjective 'critical'. This adjective seems to serve two mutually exclusive

functions. On the one hand the adjective pertains to the anti-foundational conception of knowledge adhered to by critical realists. So, in making a distinction between the transitive realm of changing fallible theories and the intransitive realm of reality external to perspectives, realists take a critical attitude to all knowledge claims, as they recognise that knowledge entails a constant examination of all perspectives. On the other hand though, and this is to refer to an aspect of critical realism not yet mentioned, critical realism is critical in a normative sense, with it being maintained that value conclusions can be derived from factual premises. Here Bhaskar argues that an objectively accurate account of capitalism would necessarily lead to a negative value judgement about capitalism, because capitalist material relations produce ideological distortions and material exploitation.

This latter version of critical realism would seem to be in disagreement with the former version, because any notion of fallibilism has been jettisoned. Instead of saying that critical realism acts as an underlabourer, supplying some situated first principles to guide research, which will produce fallible knowledge of social reality, the claim is that a definitive account of social being has been procured and that this ought to serve as the basis for radical political action. This is not to say that social science ought to set itself apart from politics but it is to say that deriving an 'ought' from an 'is' presumes that the 'is' is known with certainty, which violates any claim to anti-foundationalism, as knowledge of capitalism, in this case, would be intransitive, as would the political prescription derived from it. In short, critical realism in this sense would be an overseer, as it would hold that it had a definitive ontology of social being (i.e. capitalism). Instead of being a meta-theory or underlabourer, supplying general precepts to guide research, we would have a definitive ontology of specifics. If this is the case then the latter meaning of critical realism is based upon what Bhaskar refers to as the 'ontic fallacy', whereby it is presumed that being can be mirrored in a shopping-list ontology of discrete facts accessed directly. So in this case then, critical realism would seem to be an overseer in an ontological rather than epistemological sense.

One way around this may be to reconceptualise the 'is' as being in the transitive realm and to say that the putative facts, upon which conclusions about 'ought' are based, are derived from within a fallible perspective. The problem with this though is that it compromises the objective base which is being sought for value judgments, so that one is not moving from fact to value, but from (a) theorised / perspectival fact to (b) values which are consequently perspectival. Another problem is that such a reconceptualisation could be open to the charge of circularity. This is because all one could say is that X was good because, according to theory Y, X was good. This would also open up the problem of relativism, because if normative judgements were wholly internal to perspectives, then there could be no meta-level with which one may adjudicate between normative claims.

However, against such relativism we may note the realist point that reality sets limits upon the horizon of possible descriptions, and this can set some limits upon ethical relativism, if we maintained that normative conclusions could be based upon an ontology of human being that was better than alternative ontologies of human being. Here we could use Archer's latest work, which criticises views of human being that are basically

atomistic and asocial, together with being aemotional to varying degrees (which she calls 'modernity's man'), and the view that the self is a grammatical fiction ('society's being'). Neither view can account for the complexity of human agency and so, in effect, Archer provides an immanent critique of these views. The alternative she suggests is a view of human being as both rational and emotional (with emotions being commentaries which provide 'shoving power'), and constituted by both a personal and social identity, which develop in a dialectical interplay, via a continuous 'inner dialogue'. No ethical conclusions are derived from this, but it is useful (not just as a sociological argument) but because it opens up a conceptual space, via immanent critique, for the development of a normative theory.

One such theory is provided by Collier who argues that being and good are convertible terms, and that social relations which impede being are necessarily bad. Collier develops his theory to criticise capitalism, saying that this violates the conditions that make human existence fulfilled, and that communism is therefore required. From the factual premise that capitalism does not place value upon people *qua* people, we move to the value conclusion that this is necessarily ethically wrong. In Collier's words,

Having a life to live is not annulled, but it is violated, by having one's time 'owned' by someone else. [...] But the fact of having to live one's life as directed by another produces a permanent dissonance, a perpetual chafing at one's *jemeinigkeit*, as anyone who has ever worked in a factory or large office will confirm. [...] So each having a right to live requires not just freedom from absolute poverty, but freedom from that relative poverty which makes employment possible (1999:97).

He continues 'Justice, based on the principle that all equally have a life to live, demands only that all basic needs are met and that no wealth differences be great enough to allow one person to dispose of another's time' (1999:98).

In talking of authentic existence Collier also reacts against what may be called 'instrumental rationality', saying that technology comes to be an end in itself, rather than a means to an end, with the tail wagging the dog, or the equipment to hand wagging the Dasein. (He gives the example of working in a hospital where the smooth running of the bureaucracy was prioritised over patient well-being, so that the hospital could be said to 'function smoothly').

Such considerations may put some break on ethical relativism, for whilst there is no definitive account of being to support some list of absolute prescriptions, there are theories derived from an immanent critique of alternatives, and which seem to be more in accord with the reality of agency. However, we may still be left with the problem of tautology: it may be objected that the normative conclusions are still only valid because the theory in question defines those normative conclusions as valid, with X being important in theory Y because according to theory Y, issue X is important. We may counter this critique though by saying that if it is acknowledged that the truth content of a theory is to be understood in term of correspondence (see above on the argument that correspondence does not entail a relationship of epistemic immediacy), and that theories

derived via an immanent critique of alternative frames of reference may well provide a better understanding of the object of study, that provides the basis for immanent critique by setting limits on descriptions (and so the erroneous theories may well be described as cases of ‘language going on holiday’), then the problem of tautology is overcome. So, critical realist ethical arguments are not tautological, as the normative conclusion is derived not from the theoretical framework *per se*, but from the truth context derived from the theory, meaning that the theory is the conduit from reality to the normative conclusions (and there may well be different conduits), and not the origin.

In this case then, we may say that the normative conclusions are akin to the epistemic situated first principles noted above, in the sense that what we have are some conclusions about values, which are not created *ex nihilo* or from some privileged access to ‘reality’, but from a practical consideration of alternative terms of reference, which can then guide the normative assessment of specific practices. With these ethically situated first principles we can begin research into different areas, and develop specific arguments for specific ‘oughts’. As with epistemic first principles, ethical first principles are logically prior to investigation but chronologically post-date activity, meaning that ethical principles are derived from reflection on practices and the ontological assumptions about human being which can be used to define who and what we are.

Of course alternative critical realist ethical theories could be developed within the conceptual space delineated by Archer and, as it happens, Collier wrote *Being and Worth* before the publication of Archer’s *Being Human*. Taking the second point first, we can say that it is necessary to use Archer to situate the arguments of Collier, and that unless Collier was so situated there would be the problem that whilst his argument may be an interesting argument drawn on work from Spinoza and Heidegger, it would have no grounding as such. That is to say, Collier’s argument would be open to the charge of relativity, in the sense that instead of being situated within a space delineated via immanent critique, which lets the object of enquiry set limits upon the horizon of possible descriptions, his argument would be developed simply as a novel reworking of past philosophies. Such a novel reworking may be rhetorically persuasive but it would not be able to ground its truth claims.

Turning to the first problem, it may be argued that even if we accept that the object of enquiry sets limits upon the range of possible descriptions, there is still a potential plurality of potentially mutually exclusive realist ontologies of human being. This point can be embraced, rather than rejected if we remember that knowledge grows by what Popper referred to as conjecture and refutation: if we keep on practising immanent critique, on realist (as well as non-realist) philosophical schemes, then knowledge will continue to grow.

## **(6) Rorty, Realism And Politics**

Of course Rorty would reject such an argument, holding that whilst ‘theory’ was good for self-edification in the private sphere, the public sphere was to be understood in terms of practical solutions to practical problems. I will not try and describe all of Rorty’s political views here, but what we can say is that his arguments for liberalism entail a very

conservative and positivistic approach to politics. The reason for this is that by describing politics as a matter of practical problem solving, the status quo is assumed to be legitimate and the role of political agency is to help the status quo by resolving problems. Given the confinement of theory to the private sphere, problems are to be understood in terms of discrete facts which are manifest to all. Thus there can be no room for normative contestation, as that would mean stepping outside the status quo and theorising the structure of society. Hence Rorty is in favour of reformist movements which may, for instance, improve pay and conditions, as this is helping the smooth functioning of the labour market, and resolving a practical problem (*viz.* difficult working conditions). For Rorty campaigns which are contingent upon responding to specific problems are legitimate whilst movements are illegitimate, as movements seek to use theory to say why the whole of society is rotten. Movements turn to some divinised moving force (history, class, language, Otherness, etc.) to press for major change, whilst campaigns assist organic harmony of the social whole. Hence the left is needed to keep a conversation going with the right, as the right is complacent: the left needs to be a good maintenance worker.

It may be objected that the metaphor of the maintenance worker has mechanistic connotations, which clash with the organic metaphor cited above. My use of this analogy is deliberate though, for my point is that in Rorty's vision of politics, we would be dominated by instrumental rationality. In the practical efforts to maintain the status quo we would be dealing with discrete responses to discrete problems and the horizon of actions would be circumscribed around that which 'worked'. The mechanisms of politics would come to dominate the end of politics: instead of trying to create a system to benefit people we would have people working to benefit the system.

Collier would describe this as the equipment to hand wagging the Dasein. Extending the point we can note quickly that, using Collier's arguments about being and goodness, the upshot of Rorty's pragmatic conception of politics would necessarily be bad. We could move from a factual premise about human being to a normative conclusion against the dominance of instrumental reason and, more generally, of liberal capitalism *per se*. This is not a case, as Rorty would object, of ontology claiming a God's eye view, because the theory which could be developed against a pragmatic conception of political agency and capitalism, is developed as a fallible meta-theory, using situated ethical first principles.

### **(7) Conclusion**

In this paper I hope to have given some flavour of what critical realism is and how it may respond to its critics. This entailed dealing with sociological arguments about research methods and political arguments about how political critique may be grounded in factual premises, which would overcome pragmatism and ethical relativism. Central to this argument is the claim that realism is an underlabourer and not an overseer: it supplies guiding precepts, or situated first principles, and does not claim to have a definitive grasp of being, although having said this, it is still able to guide method and inform political critique.

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