Contents

Figures and tables ix
Contributors xi
Acknowledgements xiv

1 Introduction: ontology, philosophy and the social sciences 1

PART I
Ontology and social theory 15

2 The ontological status of subjectivity: the missing link between structure and agency 17

MARGARET S. ARCHER

3 Technology, technological determinism and the transformational model of social activity 32

CLIVE LAWSON

4 Ontological theorising and the assumptions issue in economics 50

STEPHEN PRATTEN

5 Wittgenstein and the ontology of the social: some Kripkean reflections on Bourdieu’s ‘Theory of Practice’ 68

LORENZO BERNASCONI-KOHN

6 Deducing natural necessity from purposive activity: the scientific realist logic of Habermas’ theory of communicative action and Luhmann’s systems theory 89

MARGARET MOUSSA

7 ‘Under-labouring’ for ethics: Lukács’s critical ontology 102

MÁRIO DUAYUR AND JOÃO LEONARDO MEDEIROS
PART II
Ontology and philosophy

8 Quine and the ontological turn in economics
JOHN LATSI S

9 Tracking down the transcendental argument and the synthetic a priori: chasing fairies or serious ontological business?
DAVID TYFIELD

10 Re-examining Bhaskar’s three ontological domains: the lessons from emergence
DAVE ELDER-VASS

11 Real, invented or applied? Some reflections on scientific objectivity and social ontology
ELEONORA MONTUSCHI

12 Theorising ontology
ROY BHASKAR

PART III
Ontology and applied research

13 Freedom, possibility and ontology: rethinking the problem of ‘competitive ascent’ in the Caribbean
PATRICIA NORTHJOVIR AND MICHAELINE CRICHLOW

14 On the ontology of international norm diffusion
LYNN NAVLEY

15 Critical social theorising and the emergence of state educational systems
TONE SKINNINGSRUD

16 The educational limits of critical realism? Emancipation and rational agency in the compulsory years of schooling
BRAD SHIPWAY

17 Economics and autism: why the drive towards closure?
JOHN LAWSON

18 Applying critical realism: re-conceptualising the emergent English early music performer labour market
NICHOLAS WILSON

Figures and tables

Figures
2.1 The place of social conditioning in realist social theory
2.2 Structural conditioning
10.1 Bhaskar’s three domains: populating entities
10.2 Bhaskar’s three domains: inclusion relations
10.3 Internal stratification
13.1 State systems in social life worlds
18.1 Conceptualising labour market emergence

Table
13.1 Vulnerability of Caribbean States and per capita GDP
12 Theorising ontology

Roy Bhaskar

At the time of writing my first book, A Realist Theory of Science (1975), ontology was a taboo subject. It would have been impossible for ontology to have been the central theme for a respectable conference. In fact if someone talked about ontology there would be a certain frisson: it was not the sort of thing that nice people talked about. Thirty years on it seems that everyone is talking about ontology. I wouldn’t want to say this is entirely due to critical realism but I think perhaps that critical realism has played some role in it. However, much of what I wish to say here will be an attempt to deflate ontology. I shall argue that although ontology is important, we also have to pay attention to other features of the intellectual landscape, including epistemology and issues to do with judgemental rationality – issues that have been of secondary importance for critical realists until recently. To get my corrective in at the start, I would say that we need to rebalance critical realism by paying more attention to the transitive and intrinsic alongside the intransitive, and the epistemological and axiological within ontology, than we have done.

The ontology of critical realism

Let us start with a discussion of ontology before turning to more normative issues. How did it come about that ontology was a virtually taboo subject? What was it that made ontology so difficult or even impossible? Although the philosophical doctrines of, say, Hume and Kant are familiar, it is important to appreciate a phenomenological or practical basis for them. This is in a kind of natural attitude to the world in which we do not distinguish between knowledge and objects, in which we don’t distinguish ontology from epistemology, or the transitive and intransitive domains, in which we just talk about a known world. When science is doing normal science, when things are going well, epistemically it is natural to adopt what I call this ‘natural attitude’ in which you don’t posit ontology on the one side and epistemology on the other: you just have knowledge and you take it that that knowledge is of the world. Ontology really only becomes relevant when you are not satisfied with knowledge, when what passes for knowledge is patently wrong or absurd. Thus when I came to understand the necessity to argue for ontology explicitly and to reorientate it as a subject, it was because I was then very dissatisfied with the implicit ontologies in social science and in the philosophy of social science.

These implicit ontologies were underpinned by the Humean theory of causal laws. And it seemed obvious to me that the Humean theory of causal laws, the theory that the world is based on constant conjunctions of invariant events, which presupposes that the world is unstructured and undifferentiated and unchanging, must be wrong. My problem was how to say this, because talking about the world was taboo. I had to develop an argument which allowed me both to establish – or re-establish – ontology as a discipline and to establish a new ontology. That is what I tried to do in A Realist Theory of Science – by taking, in an immanent critique, the empiricist epistemological starting point that we have experimental science and arguing to its ontological and non-empirical conditions of possibility. So I argued that for experimentation to be possible the world had to be structured and differentiated. There had to be, indeed science is essentially concerned with, a level of order beyond the constant conjunction of events and a level of order that is not necessarily in phase with the patterns of events at all. So I distinguished the domains of the real and the actual and two types of system – open and closed systems. The fallacy of supposing that you couldn’t do ontology was what I called the epistemic fallacy.

A critic might respond that although it may be necessary to change our assumptions about the fundamental nature of the world, i.e. ontology is required, surely Kant and Hume showed that ontology is an impossible project; in other words, they showed that one cannot do ontology rationally. And the critic might inquire as to how you could ever establish an ontological conclusion, because this would involve making a claim about the world which in some way you have removed from its ground, its epistemological premises. You can’t talk about things in themselves apart from our modes of knowing them. This is a very insidious line of reasoning and it is very important to see what is wrong with it – because if you can’t establish any conclusion, about anything, apart from our way of proving it or establishing it, then you can’t have any local or separate or particular knowledge, the only knowledge you can have is of the whole, and indeed the conclusions of some epistemic investigation from the epistemic investigation, and of course this is what we do in science. If we couldn’t do it then whenever we wanted to say something (about the world) we would have to repeat all our supporting procedures, that is, our whole method of establishing it. So if we are going to have knowledge of subobjectals, if we are going to have knowledge of particular things, you must be able to detach the conclusions of some epistemic investigation from the epistemic investigation, and of course this is what we do in science. If we couldn’t do it then whenever we wanted to say something (about the world) we would have to repeat all our supporting procedures, that is, our whole method of establishing it. So if we are going to have any separable knowledge, we are going to have to allow ontological conclusions from epistemological premises or assumptions and say that they are sui generis valid.

A similar misconception about ontology stems from the idea that the whole of society is required in any particular analysis. This is the fallacy of the sociologists of scientific knowledge who say that it is impossible to talk about a natural ontology because scientists are always in some social context, without which this ontology might, at least arguably, have been different. This is of course to con-
fuse what a claim is about with all the conditions without which it might have been different. It is false to suppose that because people are in a social context they cannot have knowledge about a natural and non-social world. Otherwise again you are going to have everything which is presupposed by any item of knowledge coming in to the conclusion and you are not going to be able to establish anything in science. It is very important to see this and it is very important to see that if you do not accept this detachment of conclusions you are not going to have any science. Rather what you are going to have is a totality in which everything is interconnected with everything else and in which we can never come to establish anything particular, specific or discrete at all. So we are never in a position to temporally terminate an inquiry, to put something on one side as established and to be learnt and another as under investigation and yet another as false, for example, to say 'OK, that is false, there are no witches, end of story'. We are never going to be in a position to say that, we are never going to have piecemeal progress or incremental development, because the totality is always going to be involved in any statement that we make.

I am arguing that what we have, in contrast, is a process within the culture of science in which the normal naturalisation of beliefs about the world, is suspended for the ontological investigation. A culture in which we can make genuine ontological arguments by detaching the conclusion of those arguments from their epistemological grounds when they are well justified. This is of course perfectly consistent with the easiest argument to grasp for ontology: when we refer to an object what we do in that moment in which we refer to it is detach it from the subjectivity that investigates, posits, observes. This is what I call 'referential detachment' and it is what we do when we talk about the world, detaching things (including totalities) from their evidential and supporting context. So we have the motifs here of: the suspension of the natural attitude; the attitude which epistemologizes or normalizes ontology; and the procedure of detachment.

The question, in this case, is what is ontology or what is the subject matter of ontology? If it is just things that are real, if it is just beings, then surely it must include everything. In principle everything falls within the subject matter of ontology. So what is it that gives determinacy to an ontological investigation? How can we have a discipline that will talk about some but not all aspects of being us properly 'ontological'? What is the contrast that would separate some aspects of reality from others? One might want to distinguish philosophical from scientific or substantive ontologies and say that philosophical ontologies are of greater significance. Or one might want to say that we are talking about ontology as distinct from epistemology, so epistemology is not part of an ontology, in other words our beliefs and everything to do with our beliefs are not part of ontology for that investigation. Or the ontological might be distinguished from the ethical, or the axiological. Or alternatively one might simply want to say that ontology is what you make explicit. These are all useful contrasts that might help to demarcate a specific ontological topic, and which can, I shall argue, all be made consistent and coherent. Now we are seeing the subject matter of ontology as itself differentiated.

A historical digression: Kant, Heidegger and Marx

Let us now compare what I have said with what other philosophers have said about being. I want to look in particular at Kant, Heidegger and Marx, all immensely important and influential philosophers.

When Kant referred to ontology he had the metaphysics of the scholastics in mind. The erstwhile metaphysicians of his time had come to separate their ontological conclusions altogether from any sort of epistemological premises, so that the original evidential and argumentative context of these conclusions was altogether in danger of being lost. In the meantime, in the seventeenth century Descartes, Bacon and the other early philosophers of modernity had engaged once more in a kind of reflection on specific epistemological premises, drawn now from the new experimental sciences of physics and chemistry, instantiating and reflecting a very different cosmology from that of the scholastics. And from the standpoint of the new mechanistic philosophers, the scholastic metaphysics seemed like a lot of bad old science. But, of course, the scholastic metaphysics was good science if located in the context of medieval times. And what we have to do, whilst accepting the justice of many of the criticisms of Bacon and Locke and Descartes of scholasticism, criticisms that Kant took over and developed, is to appreciate that what the advocates of the new science were doing reflected their understanding of only one specific form of science; and that actually there had been scientific methods and scientific reasoning not only in the middle ages but from at least about half way through the first millennium before the common epoch.

Not only Plato and Pythagoras, but the Buddha and Lao Tze were all involved in systematic reflections about the way in which certain structures in human society or nature, such as maybe the sun or the tides, appear in phenomenally different forms. Now the idea of the same structure manifesting in different forms is perhaps the central insight of science. You have a difference, you are not just satisfactory to record the difference, you want to see if there is a structure at work underpinning that difference, and to identify the mechanisms that generate it.

Kant's strictures against ontology can then be understood as being a continuation of the polemic against the scholastic metaphysics and for the new experimentally based sciences of physics and chemistry, and partly as a warning that ontological reflection in science should never become too severed from epistemological considerations. But it is also important to appreciate that, if you take his argument literally, you are not going to be able to say anything about the world at all. When you look at his philosophy in that light it is an extraordinarily inconsistent - or inoperable – system because it is a system in which it is impossible to say that the categories are real. It is not possible to say that the transcendental ego is real, because it is included in ontology and ontology for Kant is impermissible. It is prohibited by the critical philosophy. Now we have already seen that the mistake here is to assume that because one has a conclusion about the real world, one cannot detach it from its method of investigation. Of course substantively that actually reflects the problem that the empiricist scientists would find themselves in, they would be confronted by an interminably insoluble problem of
induction because they don’t have the concept of ontological structure. There is a level of deeper structure, containing a generative mechanism, which will allow us to explain why the empirical result must be so, and it is this level of structure that we scientists now need to identify. Or now we have got to the alethic reason, so that we want to go on and describe the reason for that alethic reason and look at what it is that explains that. From the point of view of critical realism, saying ‘That is it, eureka!, I have got to the ontological level of structure in the case at hand!’ , is of course primarily a way of signalling that we are stepping on to a new round of inquiry, a new level of investigation. It is not a dogmatic claim of infallibility or the closure of knowledge, but rather the opposite.

Heidegger makes a distinction between the ontological and the ontic, he points out correctly that the intercourse of human beings is one that has an interior, so that when I look at someone over there and I see a frown on his face or he says ‘I don’t understand’ then I need to relate to that interior. That intersubjectivity is just as important an aspect of language as referential detachment. Heidegger of course was wont to contrast his rich internal totalities of the human world with the cut and dried world that he assumed operated in science. But of course the scientist is engaged in hermeneutics as well, a hermeneutic of understanding other beliefs and indeed other sciences, including importantly as necessary means of their own innovative activity, unravelling new and deeper structures, the knowledge of which will in turn be potentially critical of beliefs and actions uninformed by them.

Nevertheless it is part of critical realist orthodoxy that there is a major difference between natural and social objects in that social objects have this interior and you can’t collapse it. This is part of our substantive ontology when we go into the social domain. We need not make the chronic mistake of the sociology of knowledge, which reasons in line with the epistemic fallacy, from the fact that all knowledge is social to the fact that all knowledge must be about society. That is a major mistake that again comes from assuming that we can’t have specific conclusions about the world, knowledge of particular aspects of being. So we can make a balanced judgement on Heidegger. Natural science also involves intersubjectivity, hermeneutics of inquiry and communication and critiques of beliefs and actions, so that social knowledge is involved in our knowledge of the natural realm. But this transitive implication of the social for our knowledge of the natural realm should not obscure the intransitive differences between them. The major difference is that natural structures do not depend on human agency and so intentionality and conceptuality in the way that social structures do.

Marx was what I call a material object realist. He also had a proto-critical realist view of science as involving movement from appearances to deeper structures that would explain them, but he never actually theorised this and so Marx’s innovations have always seemed to most Marxist philosophers and social scientists to be epistemological with the central epistemological category now becoming that of labour, with labour replacing Hegel’s category of spirit. That is fine as far as it goes: it is not a criticism of Marx that he had to concentrate on certain aspects of the totality. But where we could go wrong is if we assumed there was no need for ontology. Elsewhere I have argued that the rational development of Marxism does require something like a critical realist ontology – an ontology that it actually presupposes but does not itself theorise.

### The stratification of ontology

The last point to make about the general features of the subject matter of ontology is that it is not only differentiated, but it is stratified. As such the world can be characterised as being structured and differentiated. At a further level it can be characterised as changing or involving process, and then at a further level as being bound into totalities, and then in a yet further level as incorporating transformative agency. One can build ever more refined concepts of being within the basic structural concepts. At the same time, it is possible to take some philosophical concepts like structure and differentiation and talk about these concepts as instantiated in electricity or in magnetism or the nuclear family and look at particular forms of structures. And so it is necessary to understand being as itself structured, and structured in a way that allows the subject matter of ontology to have multiple characteristic stratifications. Indeed my own work, and its various ‘turns’, is probably best characterised as a progressive deepening of our understanding of being. That is, a progressive deepening of our understanding of the categories that are manifest in the natural and social world.

Thus let us take the system that I deployed in *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (1993), what Alan Norrie has characterized as the ‘MELD system’. This involves four levels of categorisation: the first, which I called the prime moment (1M) and can be nominated as the level of ontology itself, sees being as structured, then once you have an idea of being as structured you can see being as in process and so you have the second edge (2E), seeing being as processual. The third level (3L) is to see being as a whole, and the fourth level or dimension (4D) is to see being as incorporating transformative agency and reflexivity. A fifth aspect or level, from about the time of *From East To West* (2000), involves seeing being as incorporating a spiritual element understood as embodying deep assumptions about human nature and the affinity of human beings with the rest of nature. A sixth realm or field, which is quite recent, is one in which being is seen as enchanted or re-enchanted, that is as immediately meaningful and valuable. A seventh zone or domain – from my works on meta-reality – consists in seeing being as nondual. So you can see these different categories as embedded within each other. Indeed in this way you can understand my work to date as being a progressive deepening of our attempt to understand ontology, or, at a categorial level, the nature of being. I will now explore some of the aspects of this progressive stratification in greater depth.

As noted, the argument for ontology in *A Realist Theory of Science* was an argument for a new ontology. The most striking feature of the argument for ontology was insistence on the distinction between the transitive and intransitive dimensions that allowed the identification of the epistemic fallacy. This was the way in which empiricism and traditional epistemologies always analysed or
reduced being to our knowledge of being. As you will remember Wittgenstein said in a famous phrase that it is sufficient to talk only about the network, we do not have to talk about what the network describes. What my argument did was show that this was a fallacy. In showing that it was a fallacy I opened the way for rational arguments about ontology including the new ontology that I argued was necessary for science in *A Realist Theory of Science*.

Once epistemology is separated from ontology in this way, of course you easily run into a problem, i.e. what about beliefs? Are they a part of the world? Of course they are. Beliefs must be included within ontology, knowledge must be included within being, the referent of epistemology included within the referent of ontology. And epistemology and the whole of philosophy then can be seen in an ontological light. You would still want to have the difference between beliefs and what they are about, so you still have to struggle back something like a concept of epistemology there. It is still important to know how beliefs are justified, which requires a concept of the intrinsic aspect of science along with some notion of judgemental rationality. So we come back to what I called the holy trinity of critical realism (ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgemental rationality), their *embeddedness* (judgemental rationalism within epistemic relativism within ontological realism) and their *mutual compatibility*.

In an interesting new book, Archer, Collier and Porpora (2004) use this trinity to show how it allows us to redefine contemporary debates in theology about the existence of god. For to the believer, god is always going to be the sort of thing that must be real in some way, and can not just be fashionably parsed as a metaphorical re-description of our beliefs, values or community, on which the whole project of theology makes no sense. This holy trinity, then, has many implications.

The basic argument from ontology should make clear the idea of the inexorability of ontology. One does not have to make it explicit unless challenged or unless a dominant conception is thought to be wrong. If it is thought to be wrong, then ontology has to be made explicit, thematised and critiqued. But ontology is still inexorable. It is impossible to talk about a known world, one can’t talk about objects of knowledge, without presupposing a certain way of being, an ontology for the world known. So that is the first theme, the theme of the *inexorability of ontology*. A second theme is that of the *all-inclusiveness of ontology*, which basically includes everything and therefore obviously we need to make a lot of important self-distinctions within ontology.

From what I have said so far it should be pretty clear that the argument for ontology is really the same as that for realism. It is the argument for referential detachment, for existential intransitivity. Critical realism’s importance lies in involving realism about new kinds of things such as structures, systems, processes, wholes, agency, social structure, social relations, ideologies. Of course one could say that the great scientists already knew there were structures, and it is true much of what was involved was bringing out their rational intuitions. But if you look at it as being a set of arguments, if you look at arguments, setting arguments for ontology and arguments for realism side by side makes it possible to see that looking at the world from an explicitly ontological point of view deepens our feel for what realism is and might be.

It is possible, for example, to talk of *dispositional realism* in which possibilities are seen as just as real as, in a sense more real than, the instances that actualise them. How is it possible to have an actualisation that is not based on a real possibility? In this case a domain of real possibilities exists which should include the implicit, the enfolded and much more. Furthermore, we have a thesis that I call *categorial realism*. This is the idea, which I think is a very important idea, that the categories are not just subjective classifications of the world, they are objective features of it. So it is not just that Ohms law is real, it is that causality or nomic lawfulness as such is real, they are real features of the world. And then of course we must allow not just for Ohms law to be real generically, so to say for one instance of it to be real, but for all particular instances to be real. Moreover we must allow for Ohms law not only to be ranged under more basic structures of electro-magnetism, but also to instantiate more basic philosophical categories such as causality; and also to have ranged below it, particular groups or networks of instances of Ohms law, and then those instances in their contexts, furnishing in total a complex mosaic of differentiated (kinds of) stratifications, so that we see the whole field of ontology as being a multi-faceted configuration in its own right.

In other words, the idea of categorial realism is that philosophy has real referents. Causality, space, time, process, emergence, absence, the presence of the past, totality, holistic causality are real features in the world. They don’t stand in a more problematic relationship to the world because they designate more abstract features of the world than the features designated by the referents of substantive theories, be they theories of electricity or class structure. Just as the mechanisms those theories posit are not ontologically more problematic than their instances, such as particular electrical phenomena, like the flash lightning that ravaged parts of Cornwall yesterday, or like the threatened strike by BA workers next week, all these are part of the same world. We should be able to talk about categories, mechanisms and their instances in the same breath philosophically, as part of a unified ontology, whilst realising that they occupy different levels of abstraction, or analysis in science. This is categorial realism.

A further distinction, which I have discussed, for example in *Reflections on Meta-Reality*, includes *alethic realism* (and also moral alethic realism). In this context I have also discussed the importance of *tina formations*. The idea of a tina formation is the necessity that must manifest itself even through a falsity. Actually I think this opens up an extraordinary arena for ontological investigations, looking at how particular ideological constructs, particular ways in which false and superficial theories, actually must presuppose the true and real to work, to keep going – truths which need only be brought out to show the lies, moral absurdities and performative contradictions in virtue of which oppression (including self-oppression) sustains itself. We can in fact make use of axial rationality, which I shall discuss presently, to show how theories deconstruct themselves. We can show this to those who ideologically believe in them. Of
course this has to be done within the context of open rational inquiry, in which we must be equally prepared to look at our own ideological baggage.

So far my comments have been restricted to IM, the domain of being as structured. But in this sort of way one could go through the tropes and possibilities, implications and critiques pertaining to all my seven categorial levels of being. Of course that classification, those seven levels, is just my own classification. Others may prove just as important and just as valid. In any event I think there are really important explanations and explorations in ontology to be achieved and that this is an extremely fertile, if barely broached field for critical realists to work in.

Judgemental rationality and the problem of the ‘other’

Let us return to the critical realist ‘holy trinity’ of ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgemental rationality. Critical realism claims to make the reality of objects, structures and so forth consistent with the ideas of the multiplicity and the relativity of our beliefs about them – in what I called the intrastive and transitive dimensions respectively of science. Moreover it also claims to be able to make both ontological realism and epistemological relativism consistent with judgemental rationality, that is the idea that there are better or worse grounds for our beliefs. As I have suggested above, a great deal of progress has been made within the critical realist literature in discussing the first two elements of the trinity. Unfortunately, it seems that we do not yet have good or convincing ways of resolving the great epistemological and moral problems of our social order.

It is helpful now to consider the concept of four-planar social being (introduced in Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation (1986) and extended in Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom (1993)). These are the plane of our material transactions with nature, the plane of social interactions with others, the plane of social structure and the plane of the stratification of the personality. It is not difficult to see that we are in fact in crisis at all of these four levels. It is clear that we are living in a world in which there are great ills, great injustices, great asymmetries of power. It is also clear that we lack a rational organon, or a way in which we can render intelligible to ourselves and each other how we are to engage in the task of persuading people into a better social order and form of social existence, and a better mode of working and being with nature. This is a profound crisis of rationality. Again, if you look at some of the cultural conflicts, conflicts at the face of the ‘social cube’ which describes the plane of social interactions with others, and which reflects the conflicts between belief systems today, a continual motif is what seems to be the impossibility of understanding and reconciliation. Many Europeans have a problem with President Bush and the American leadership, the American leadership has a problem with the other in the form of the Iraqi other, western civilisation it is said has a problem with the Islamist other, the Islamist other has a problem with the west. We seem to be faced with profound problems of moral and epistemological incommensurability.

Moreover we do not have any idea of a meta-logic in terms of which we could calibrate and resolve the incommensurabilities we have in the world today.

These are all problems of judgemental rationality. What I want to argue is that we do actually have a form of judgemental rationality that is implicit in science and implicit in all cultures, which I shall call ‘axial rationality’. This is a form of reasoning, based on the principle that there must be explanations for differences. This is the basic pattern of reasoning in science. If you operate with material objects and they break down, you need to posit an explanation or generative difference for that. If you want to make any progress in mathematics, or if you want to operate a computer, you will need to search for and identify the relevant generative differences that account for manifest differences in behaviour and the similarities or identities that persist through them. This primitive axial rationality is there in all cultures. I am currently writing a book in which I try to show how we can resolve our differences rationally through a method which is continuous with science but which does not beg any one form of scientific knowledge.

I would like to suggest that we are, as a species, bound by two transcendental capacities. One is the transcendental capacity to identify with others, which forms the basis of universal solidarity and the second is a transcendental capacity not only to identify and understand others but to reconcile with them, axial rationality. These are the themes that I want to stress within the context of the sort of ontology I discussed above.

Let me just motivate this approach a little further. Take the case of understanding the other. Understanding the other is clearly an essential pre-requisite for any kind of sustained communication. Of course it depends on who the other is. But in our society today we have a kind of demonisation of certain selected others. What happens if we don’t understand the other and the other is a human being who nevertheless acts intentionally for reasons or motives and regards them as being grounded? The other thinks that they are right, that they have good reasons for what they are doing and that these reasons are grounded. Criteriologically, there is no difference between us and the other. Now suppose we don’t like what the other is doing. The important point is that unless we actually get to what is going on in the head of the other, we are not going to change their behaviour. We will not be able to change their behaviour because we do not know what it is that is making them do what they do. If we do not understand what makes a person a terrorist, we are not going to have any effect on terrorism. Understanding the other, then, is tremendously important. Once we start to understand the other then it is necessary to think about how it might be possible to get the other to change. This will involve questions of normative justice and reconciliation. Getting the other to change will not only be easier, but actually depends upon, the extent to which we can put ourselves in the place of the other. It is not only that we must feel as if we could have been the other, but that actually we could have been the other.¹

If I had been born into an Arab family, as I could have been, if I had been taken into an Arab context and raised in an Arab household, I would have come to have Arab beliefs. And even if from those Arab beliefs I may have perhaps now come...
to my actual positions, the positions that I feel I can rationally justify now, my itinerary would have been very different. There is a transcendental capacity to identify with others in virtue of the fact that we could have been other – for in virtue of the fact that we could have been any other, we must have the equipment to identify and understand the other’s point of view. So there are going to be no insuperable problems of understanding.

Let us take the case of justification. If it is admitted that there is a kind of base-level rationality, which is central to the idea of axial rationality, then once a conversation is started it can be developed. Moreover once it is understood that the conversation is linked in to praxis, to material transformations of nature and society, and that the conversation is always more than a simple exchange of views, involving commitments to act, then we can gradually work our way towards mutual understanding and reconciliation. And then we would have a position in which we had ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgemental rationality for the social world, based on these transcendental capacities to identify and to achieve reconciliation with others.

These capacities would be based on an ontology of universal solidarity stemming from our common humanity and the contingency of the particular circumstances of our birth; and an epistemology, or axial rationality, which is actually but imperfectly operative in all our different epistemic contexts, in virtue of which we can indeed reach agreement, or transcend differences with others, overcome alienation, conflict and social aporia generally. This is to say, in virtue of axial rationality it is possible to work our way through different epistemological and cultural milieux until we come to see how it is possible to have an agreement with others. Be that as it may, I think that it is these kinds of issues that critical realism has to address today.

How is it possible for us to talk to people in a different ideological or cultural context, which is interdependent with ours? Talk includes dialogue as well as discourse. In dialogue we imaginatively suspend the context of transformative action – of material practices, struggles and solidarity, but also music, song and dance, which are also based on particular social relations and express our four-dimensional social being as well – in order to better become (one with) – strange as it may be to say – the other, to achieve transcendental identity with them.

Here I think we can go back to Heidegger, or at least my take on Heidegger, and talk about subject-subject relations. Clearly if I have a relation with this table it is a subject-object relation, if I have a relation with another human being it is going to be a subject-subject one. I want to know what is going on inside, I want to understand his or her feelings, attitudes, experience, etc., I want to be able to talk to that person. This is not the same as talking to a body, and to do this I have to constitute the other person as an epistemological subject in his or her own right just as I am when I investigate nature. When I investigate the table I am an epistemological subject investigating this object. When I talk to another human being I have to see him or her as just such an epistemological subject. And understanding that person as an epistemological subject is itself a necessary condition for seeing him or her as a moral agent. This in turn is a necessary condition for seeing another person as a member of a polity that may or may not be democratic, as it is a precondition for seeing them as a rational interlocutor in a dialogue or a participant in a discourse. Treating another person as an epistemological subject is of course also a precondition for treating him or her as a human being. If I don’t constitute him as an epistemological subject then someone may degrade him in a way that the British and American soldiers degraded Iraqi prisoners. It is a short step from not understanding your enemy as an epistemological subject to treating them in that degraded way; and what happens when somebody treats people in that degraded, inhuman, reified way is that they themselves become inhuman. When somebody talks or acts in that way they become inhuman, because they are not able to relate in a human way, they are not relating as a human being. By treating the other as an object, they dehumanize, reify and objectify themselves.

So the idea of subject-subject relations is one that should be taken very seriously, bearing in mind particularly the contingency of our own birth, our own incarnation – once we see we could have been the other. This kind of protracted or extended subject-subject relation is one that involves practical transformative action as well as imaginative or symbolic action, discourse as well as dialogue, material transformation and conceptual transcendence. We transform the world with the other, particularly we transform our own social structures as well as being able to operate on the social structures of the other and those social, natural and cosmic structures that connect us all. It is my claim, although I can’t possibly justify it fully here, that whatever the other was doing before, we should constitute him or her as an epistemological subject and see them as ultimately governed by the logic of axial rationality. This is the same logic that governed the Buddha, Socrates and Jesus. I don’t believe there is an effective culture in the world that doesn’t observe this way of learning and explaining things. This is of course quite apart from the fact that we are in one globe and that some of the allegedly incommensurable cultures, such as the culture of Islam and the culture of Christianity or Judaism, are so closely connected geo-historically.

When I have a new insight about my own or somebody else’s condition this will be an insight about ontology, so ontology still plays the key role. But it is ontology from the point of view of living in a better world, an ontology that includes the call for social justice without which it is unlikely that we can have peace. And unless we have social justice and peace we are not going to have a sustainable future. Indeed, we are not going to have any future at all. These other epistemological and axiological concerns need to be borne in mind at the same time as we deepen and enjoy our ontological explorations.

Note

1 If you or I had been born in Japan we would have learnt Japanese, and would have been encultured into a Japanese way of life and even if we had come to arrive at exactly our own present beliefs and present attitudes, and as a result of purely rational processes, we would have arrived at them via a different route or itinerary.
References


Part III

Ontology and applied research