Since the publication of Roy Bhaskar's *A Realist Theory of Science* in 1975, critical realism has emerged as one of the most powerful new directions in the philosophy of science and social science, offering a real alternative to both positivism and post modernism. This reader is designed to make accessible in one volume, to lay person and academic, student and teacher alike, key readings to stimulate debate about and within critical realism.

The four parts of the reader correspond to four parts of the writings of Roy Bhaskar:

- part one explores the transcendental realist philosophy of science elaborated in *A Realist Theory of Science*
- the second section examines Bhaskar's critical naturalist philosophy of social science
- part three is devoted to the theory of explanatory critique, which is central to critical realism
- the final part is devoted to the theme of dialectic, which is central to Bhaskar's most recent writings

The volume includes extracts from Bhaskar's most important books, as well as selections from all of the other most important contributors to the critical realist programme. The volume also includes both a general introduction and original introductions to each section.
CRITICAL REALISM

Essential Readings

Edited by Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, Tony Lawson and Alan Norrie
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Critical realism is a movement in philosophy and the human sciences and cognate practices most closely associated with – in the sense of identified with or emanating from – though by no means restricted to – the work of Roy Bhaskar. This movement is now fully international and multi-disciplinary and arguably in the quarter century since the initial publication of *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975) has transformed the intellectual scene. At least, at the turn of the millennium it presents an intellectual challenge to other philosophies that they can scarcely refuse. This reader is designed to make accessible, in one volume, to layperson and academic, student and teacher alike, key readings to stimulate debate about and within critical realism.¹

The four parts of the reader correspond to four parts of the writings of Roy Bhaskar: section one to his *transcendental realist* philosophy of science, elaborated in *RTS* (1975, 1978) and subsequently augmented and refined; section two to his *critical naturalist* philosophy of social science, first systematically presented in *PON* (1979, 1989, 1998) and likewise developed; section three to the theory of *explanatory critique* implicit in *PON*, elaborated in a number of articles published in the early 1980s (see e.g. *RR* Chapter 6) and most fully in *SRHE* (1986); and section four to the theme of *dialectic* on which Bhaskar had published since the early 1980s but only fully developed in *DPF* (1993) (and *PE* (1994)). Extracts from all four canonical books are included below. These theories did not appear in an intellectual vacuum and this introduction will say something about the context in which they arose as well as their principal features.

The term ‘critical realism’ arose by elision of the phrases ‘transcendental realism’ and ‘critical naturalism’, but Bhaskar and others in this movement have accepted it since ‘critical’, like ‘transcendental’, suggested affinities with Kant’s philosophy, while ‘realism’ indicated the differences from it. It should be noted that the principal themes of each section both presuppose and develop the themes of the sections preceding it, so that there is a definite ordination to ‘critical realism’. Thus Bhaskar refers to the philosophy espoused in *DPF* and *PE* as ‘dialectical critical realism’ and this does radically refine and
rework the theories of science, social science and ethics presented earlier; as he has indicated they will be further recast in his turn to the third (totalizing) and fourth (reflexive or transformatively practical) moments of his dialectical philosophy. Something will now be said about the context and content of the theories of transcendental realism, critical naturalism, explanatory critique and dialectic sequentially by way of general introduction to the readings excerpted below.

**Transcendental realism**

Transcendental realism was born in the context of vigorous critical activity oriented against the positivist conception of science that had dominated the first two-thirds of the twentieth century. This was based squarely on Humean empiricism, epitomized in the claim of Mach\(^2\) that ‘natural laws were nothing but the mimetic reproduction of facts in thought, the object of which is to replace and save the trouble of new experience’. It is perhaps most familiar to us retrospectively in the guise of the logical positivism of the Vienna circle of the 1920s and 1930s which married the epistemological empiricism and reductionism of Mach, Pearson and Duhem with the logical innovations of Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein. The positivist vision of science pivoted on a **monistic** theory of scientific development and a **deductivist** theory of scientific structure. The attack on the former came from three main sources. First, from Popper and (ex-) Popperians like Lakatos and Feyerabend who argued that it was falsifiability, not verifiability, that was the hallmark of science and that it was precisely in revolutionary breakthroughs such as those associated with Galileo or Einstein that its epistemological significance lay. Second, from Kuhn and other historians and sociologists of science who drew scrupulous attention to the real social processes involved in the reproduction and transformation of scientific knowledge in what critical realism called the transitive (epistemological and geo-historical-social) dimension of science. Finally, from Wittgensteinians such as Hanson, Toulmin and Sellars who latched on to the non-atomistic or theory-dependent and mutable character of facts in science.

A problem for all these trends was to sustain a clear concept of the continued independent reality of being – of the intransitive or ontological dimension – in the face of the relativity of our knowledge – in the transitive or epistemological dimension. This arose particularly acutely in the debate about the possibility and, according to Kuhn and Feyerabend, the actuality of meaning variance as well as inconsistency in scientific change. Kuhn and Feyerabend suggested that it may come to pass that no meaning was shared in common between a theory and its successor. This seemed to render problematic the idea of a rational choice between such ‘incommensurable’ theories and even encouraged (superidealist) scepticism about the existence of a theory-independent world. However, if the relation between the theories is
one of conflict rather than merely difference, this presupposes that they are alternative accounts of the same world, and if one theory can explain more significant phenomena in terms of its descriptions than the other can in terms of its, then there is a rational criterion for theory choice, and a fortiori a positive sense to the idea of scientific development over time (cf. RTS, p. 248). In this sort of way critical realism claims to be able to combine and reconcile ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgmental rationality.

The deductivist theory of structure initially came under fire from, among others, Michael Scriven, Mary Hesse and Rom Harré for the lack of sufficiency of Humean criteria for causality and law, Hempelian criteria for explanation and Nagelian criteria for the reduction of one science to another more basic one. This critique was then generalized by Roy Bhaskar to incorporate the lack of necessity for them also. Bhaskar argued that positivism could sustain neither the necessity nor the universality — and in particular the transfactuality (in open and closed systems alike) — of laws; and for an ontology (1) that was irreducible to epistemology; (2) that did not identify the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical; and (3) that was both stratified, allowing emergence, and differentiated. That is, in effect for three kinds of ontological depth which may be summarized by the concepts of intransitivity, transfactuality and stratification.

The lynchpin of deductivism was the Popper-Hempel theory of explanation, according to which explanation proceeded by deductive subsumption under universal laws (interpreted as empirical regularities). Its critics pointed out, however, that deductive subsumption typically does not explain but merely generalizes the problem (for instance, from 'why does x θ?' to 'why do all x's θ?). Instead what is required for a genuine explanation is, as Whewell had inveighed against Mill in the 1850s and Campbell against Mill's latter-day successors in the 1920s, the introduction of new concepts not already contained in the explanandum, models, picturing plausible generative mechanisms, and the like. But the new realism broke with Campbell's Kantianism by allowing that, under some conditions, these concepts or models could describe newly identified and deeper or subtler or otherwise more recondite levels of reality. Theoretical entities and processes, initially imaginatively posited as plausible explanations of observed phenomena, could come to be established as real, through the construction either of sense-extending equipment or of instruments capable of detecting the effects of the phenomena. (In the latter case we invoke a causal criterion for attributing reality: esse no longer est percipi.) All this strongly suggests a vertical or theoretical realism. Science could now be seen as a continuing and reiterated process of movement from manifest phenomena, through creative modelling and experimentation or other empirical controls, to the identification of their generative causes, which now become the new phenomena to be explained. The stratification of nature imposes a certain dynamic logic to scientific
discovery, in which progressively deeper knowledge of natural *necessity a posteriori* is uncovered.

However critical or transcendental realism argued that a *horizontal* or transfactual realism was additionally necessary to sustain the *universality* (within their range) of the workings of generative mechanisms or laws. Thus it is a condition of the intelligibility of experimentation that the laws which science identifies under experimental or analogously closed conditions continue to hold (but transfactually, not as empirical regularities) extraexperimentally. And this provides the rationale or ground for practical and applied explanatory, diagnostic, exploratory, scientific work too. Indeed the whole point of an experiment is to identify a universal (within its range) law, which, by virtue of the necessity for the experiment, is not actually, or even less empirically, so. Laws, then, and the workings of nature have to be analysed dispositionally as the powers, or more precisely tendencies, of underlying generative mechanisms which may on the one hand – the horizontal aspect – be possessed unexercised, exercised unactualized, and actualized undetected or unperceived; and on the other – the vertical aspect – be discovered in an ongoing irreducibly empirical open-ended process of scientific development.

A transcendental argument from the conditions of the possibility of experimentation in science thus establishes at once the irreducibility of ontology, of the theory of being, to epistemology and a novel non-empiricist but non-rationalist, non-actualist, stratified and differentiated ontology, that is characterized by the prevalence of structures as well as events (stratification) and open systems as well as closed (differentiation).

Thus let us revert to the three kinds of depth in transcendental realism:

(1) **Intransitivity.** The Western philosophical tradition has mistakenly and anthropocentrically reduced the question of what is to the question of what we can know. This is the *epistemic fallacy* (cf. RTS, p. 36), epitomized by concepts like the ‘empirical world’. Science is a social product, but the mechanisms it identifies operate prior to and independently of their discovery (existential intransitivity). Transitive and intransitive dimensions must be distinguished. Failure to do so results in the reification of the fallible social products of science. Of course being contains, but it is irreducible to, knowledge, experience or any other human attribute or product. The domain of the real is distinct from and greater than the domain of the empirical.

(2) **Transfactuality.** The laws of nature operate independently of the closure or otherwise of the systems in which they occur, and the domain of the real is distinct from and greater than the domain of the actual (and hence the empirical too). Failure to appreciate this results in the fallacy of *actualism*, collapsing and homogenizing reality. Once the ubiquity of open systems and the necessity for experimentation or analogous procedures are appreciated, then laws must be analysed as transfactual, as universal (within their range) but neither actual nor empirical. Constant conjunctions are produced not
found. Laws operate independently of both the conditions for and their identification. **Theoretical explanations** for their part explain laws in terms of the structures which account for or perhaps merely ground them, while they are applied transfactually in the **practical** explanation of the phenomena they co-produce in open systems.

(3) There is **stratification** both in nature, and reflecting it in science, and both (a) within a single science or subject matter and (b) between a series of them.

(a) Recognition of the stratification of nature and the isolation of a concept of natural necessity discernible *a posteriori* allows the resolution of a whole host of philosophical problems, most notoriously the problem of induction, the untheorized or tacit condition of possibility of which is actualism. Thus if there is a real reason, located in its molecular or atomic constitution, why water boils rather than freezes when it is heated, then it must do so (cf. RTS, chapter 3.5–3.6).

(b) The real multiplicity of natural mechanisms grounds a real plurality of sciences which study them. Even though one kind of mechanism may be explained or grounded in terms of another, it cannot necessarily be reduced to or explained away in terms of it. Such grounding is consistent with its emergence so that the course of nature is different than it would have been if the more basic stratum alone operated; so that, to invoke our causal criterion for reality, the higher-order structure is real and worthy of scientific investigation in its own right.

This takes us neatly to the domain of the social sciences, where what Outhwaite has called the ‘law-explanation’ orthodoxy was never even remotely plausible.

**Critical naturalism**

For most of its recognized history, the philosophy of the human sciences has been dominated by dichotomies and dualisms. It was the aim of *The Possibility of Naturalism* to transcend them. (1) **The overriding dichotomy or split** was between a *hyper-naturalistic positivism* and an *anti-naturalistic hermeneutics*, resolved in the generation of a *qualified critical naturalism*. I discuss this in detail immediately below. (2) Then there was the split between individualism and collectivism (or holism), which critical naturalism would resolve by seeing society *relationally* and as *emergent*. (3) A connected split, upon which the debate about structure and agency was joined, was between the *voluntarism* associated with the Weberian tradition and the *reification* associated with the Durkheimian one. This critical naturalism would transcend in its *transformational model of social activity*. (4) Then there was the dichotomy between facts and values, most sharply expressed in Hume’s law (discussed in the next section), which critical naturalism would refute in its theory of *explanatory critiques*. (5) Then, fuelling the positivism/hermeneutics debate, was the
dichotomy between reasons and causes, which critical naturalism would resolve by showing how, once one rejected Humean causality, reasons could be causes sui generis on a critical realist conception of causality. (6) Finally underpinning many of these dichotomies was the dualism between mind and body (or, more macroscopically, between society and nature), which critical naturalism would overcome, by seeing mind as an emergent power of matter in its synchronic emergent powers materialism.

The Possibility of Naturalism, first published in 1979, was oriented primarily to the first of these questions, which was whether society, and human phenomena generally, could be studied in the same way as nature, i.e., ‘scientifically’. There were two leading positions. (1) A more or less unqualified naturalism, which asserted that they could, which normally took the form of positivism, dominant in the philosophy and practice of the social sciences. Its immediate philosophical antecedents lay in the work of Hume, Mill, Mach and the Vienna Circle, providing the spine of the orthodox conception of science which it transplanted to the social world. (2) An anti-naturalism, based on a distinctive conception of the uniqueness of the social realm, that is as pre-interpreted, conceptualized or linguistic in character – hermeneutics, the official opposition to positivism. Its philosophical ancestry came from Dilthey, Simmel, Rickert and Weber who fused Hegelian and Kantian dichotomies to produce a contrast between the phenomenal world of nature and the intelligible world of freedom so as to ground dichotomies between causal explanation and interpretive understanding, the nomothetic and ideographic, the repeatable and the unique, the realms of physics and of history. If positivism found expression in the Durkheimian sociological tradition and in behaviourism, structuralism and functionalism, hermeneutics did so in aspects of the Weberian tradition and in phenomenological, ethnomethodological and interpretive studies. A discrimination must be made within the second camp between those who sought to synthesize or combine positivist and hermeneutical principles such as Weber and Habermas, and those dualists, such as Gadamer or Winch, who denied positivism any purchase in the human sphere. (It should be noted in passing that it is less easy to characterize the work of post-structuralist or, more generally, post-modernist thinkers. For the most part they adopt a Nietzschean epistemological perspectivism on a Humean or positivist ontological base.)

Now both positivist and hermeneutistic views, that is the standard naturalist and anti-naturalist positions, shared an essentially positivist account of natural science. If this is, as critical realists argue, false, then the possibility arises of a third position: (3) a qualified, critical and non-reductionist, naturalism, based upon a transcendental realist account of science and, as such, necessarily respecting (indeed grounded in) the specificity and emergent properties of the social realm. Moreover if the positivist account of natural science is false, then positivists have to make out a special case as to why positivism should be uniquely (and most implausibly) applicable to the
human realm; and hermeneuticists, for their part, have to reassess their contrasts. Thus both of Winch’s two main arguments in his very influential *The Idea of a Social Science* (1959) are parasitic on a positivist ontology. Constant conjunctions of events are neither necessary nor sufficient either for natural or for social scientific understanding: both alike are concerned with the discovery of intelligible connections in their subject matter. Nor do the conceptual and the empirical jointly exhaust the real. Critical realism can allow that conceptuality is distinctive, without supposing that it is exhaustive, of social life.

Let me elaborate on this. The social world is characterized by the complete absence of laws and explanations conforming to the positivist canon. In response to this positivists plead that the social world is much more complex than the natural world or that the laws that govern it can only be identified at some more basic, e.g. neurophysiological, level. But positivists are wrong to expect the social sciences to find constant conjunctions in the human world, for they are scarce enough in the natural; while hermeneuticists are wrong to conclude from the absence of such conjunctions that the human sciences are radically unlike the natural sciences. Closed systems cannot be artificially established in the human sciences. But, as Tony Lawson has shown in his contributions to Part I, this does not mean that the identification of epistemically significant non-random patterns or results cannot provide the empirical controls and contrasts that experimentation plays in physics and chemistry. Moreover the fact that social life is pre-interpreted provides a ready-made starting point for the social sciences. But there are no grounds for treating these data as exhaustive of the subject matter of social science, as incorrigible or their operation as non-causal. Thus rejecting Humean causality and acknowledging emergence allows us to see reasons as causes, but causes which may, for instance, be rationalizations.

Thus the hermeneutical position is often buttressed by the argument that the human sciences are concerned with the reasons for agents’ behaviour and that such reasons cannot be analysed as causes. For, first, reasons are not logically independent of the behaviour they explain. Moreover, second, they operate at a different language level (Waismann) or belong to a different language-game (Wittgenstein) from causes. But natural events can likewise be redescribed in terms of their causes (for instance, toast as burnt). Furthermore, unless reasons were causally efficacious in producing one rather than another sequence of bodily movements, sounds or marks, it is difficult to see how there can be grounds for preferring one reason explanation to another, and indeed eventually the whole practice of giving reason explanations must come to appear as without rationale.

The positive case for critical naturalism turns on the extent to which an independent analysis of the objects of social and psychological knowledge is consistent with the transcendental realist theory of science. Thus whereas on the Weberian tradition social objects are seen as a result of, or constituted by
intentional or meaningful human behaviour, tending to voluntarism, and on
the Durkheimian tradition social objects are seen as possessing a life of their
own, external to and coercing the individual, tending to reification, the criti-
cal realist conception stresses that society is both (a) a pre-existing and
(transcendentally and causally) necessary condition for intentional agency
(Durkheim’s insight) but equally (b) as existing and persisting only in virtue
of it. On this conception, then, society is both the condition and outcome of
human agency and human agency both reproduces and transforms society.
However there is an important asymmetry here: at any moment of time
society is pre-given for the individuals who never create it, but merely repro-
duce or transform it. The social world is always pre-structured. This is a
major difference between Bhaskar’s transformational model of social activity
and Giddens’s theory of structuration which Margaret Archer highlights in
Part 2. It means that agents are always acting in a world of structural con-
straints and possibilities that they did not produce. Social structure, then, is
both the ever-present condition and the continually reproduced outcome of
intentional human agency. Thus people do not marry to reproduce the
nuclear family or work to sustain the capitalist economy. Yet it is the
unintended consequence (and inexorable result) of, as it is the necessary con-
dition for, their activity.

On this conception, in contrast to the hermeneutical perspective, then,
actors’ accounts are both corrigible and limited by the existence of
unacknowledged conditions, unintended consequences, tacit skills and
unconscious motivations; but in opposition to the positivist view, actors’
accounts form the indispensable starting point of social enquiry. The trans-
formational model of social activity entails that social life possesses a recur-
sive and non-teleological character, as agents reproduce and transform the
very structures which they utilize (and are constrained by) in their substan-
tive activities. It also indicates a relational conception of the subject matter
of social science, in contrast to the methodological individualist and col-
lectivist conceptions characteristic of the utilitarian (and Weberian) and
Durkheimian traditions of social thought. Related to this is the controversy
about ideal types. For critical realists the grounds for abstraction lie in the
real stratification (and ontological depth) of nature and society. They are not
subjective classifications of an undifferentiated empirical reality, but
attempts to grasp (for example, in real definitions of forms of social life
already understood in a pre-scientific way) precisely the generative mechan-
isms and causal structures which account in all their complex and multiple
determinations for the concrete phenomena of human history. Closely con-
nected with this is a reassessment of Marx as, at least in Capital, a scientific
realist – contrary to pre-existing marxist and non-marxist interpretations. In
its wake too is a reassessment of other founding figures in the social sciences
(such as Durkheim and Weber) as combining aspects of a realist and some or
other non-realist method and ontology.
Certain emergent features of social systems which, on the invocation of a causal criterion for ascribing reality, can be regarded as ontological limits on naturalism, are immediately derivable from the transformational model of social activity. These may be summarized as the concept-dependence, activity-dependence and greater space–time specificity of social structures. The causal interdependency between social science and its subject matter specifies a relational limit; while the condition that social systems are intrinsically open – the most important epistemological limit – accounts for the absence of crucial or decisive test situations in principle, necessitating reliance on exclusively explanatory (not predictive) criteria for the rational assessment of theories. (A fourth critical limit will be discussed in the next section.) However subject to (and, arguably, just in virtue of) these qualifications both the characteristic modalities of theoretical and applied explanation which critical realists specify appear possible in the social, just as in the natural sphere. Thus theoretical explanation proceeds by description of significant features, retrodiction to possible causes, elimination of alternatives and identification of the generative mechanism or causal structure at work (which now becomes a new phenomenon to explain) (DREI); applied explanation by resolution of a complex event (etc.) into its components, theoretical redescriptions of these components, retrodiction to possible antecedents of the components and elimination of alternative causes (RRRE).

On critical naturalism, then, the social sciences can be ‘sciences’ in exactly the same sense as natural ones, but in ways which are as different (and specific) as their objects. If the hermeneutical starting point of social science, in some pre-conceptualized social practice, lends to them a closer affinity with the transcendental and dialectical methods characteristic of philosophy, any slight on a critical naturalism is dissolved by reflection on the fact that these forms of argument are merely a species of the wider genus of retroductive ones familiar to all the sciences.

Explanatory critiques

The Possibility of Naturalism had identified a fourth critical difference between the social and natural sciences, necessitated by the consideration that the subject matter of social science includes not just social objects but beliefs about those social objects (or put another way that social objects include beliefs about themselves), making possible an explanatory critique of consciousness (and being), entailing judgements of value and action without parallel in the domain of the natural sciences, so vindicating a modified form of a substantive ethical naturalism, i.e., the absence of an unbridgeable logical gap between statements of facts and values of the kind maintained by Hume, Weber and Moore. And the theory of explanatory critique is most economically presented as a refutation of the philosophical orthodoxy known as ‘Hume’s law’ that the transition from factual to evaluative statements,
although frequently made (and perhaps even psychologically necessary), is logically inadmissible.

It need not be denied by the advocate of Hume's law that causal relations exist between factual and evaluative statements such that they motivate, predispose or causally influence each other, but it is asserted to be the case that facts do not logically entail values. Doubt is immediately cast upon this by the value-impregnated character of much social scientific discourse. This seems closely bound up with the value-impregnated character of the social reality that the social sciences are seeking to describe and explain, which is such that the best (most precise or accurate or complete) description of a social situation will almost inevitably be evaluative, i.e., possess value implications. However the defender of Hume's law can still argue that one is free to reject the value, so to speak, in the social reality which necessitates such a description. It is for these sort of reasons that the arguments, prevalent in the mid- and late-1960s of Searle from institutional facts, Prior, Philippa Foot and others from functional facts and Anscombe's generalization of their arguments through to the notion of flourishing are less than logically compelling. For one can always dispute that promising, good watches, knives or guns or the flourishing of some particular species are themselves good things.

The critique of Hume's law really gets off the ground when we refuse to detotalize or extrude (e.g. by hypostatization) social beliefs from the societies in which they are found, i.e., which include or contain them and in which they are in some manner formed. Such beliefs may patently be logically contradictory, as Edgley and Archer note, or in some other way, be false to the subject matter they are about. And it is clearly within the remit of factual social science, which includes in its subject matter not just social objects but, as social objects, beliefs about those objects, to show this. If and when it has done so we can pass immediately to a negative evaluation of them and of action based on them, and, ceteris paribus, to a positive evaluation of their rejection.

The second step is taken when we reject the idea that beliefs cannot be causally explained. If we have a true account of the causes of such false beliefs then we may pass immediately to a negative evaluation of those causes, and thence to any condition, structure or state of affairs found to be necessary for them, and thence, ceteris paribus, to a positive evaluation of action directed at removing or transforming those causes and their conditions. In a nutshell, as Collier points out, the theory of explanatory critique opens up the exciting possibility that we may be able to discover values, where beliefs prove to be incompatible with their own true explanation.

Let us now consider some possible rejoinders. First, it might be objected that this refutation depends upon our acceptance of the value that truth is a good and falsity is an ill. But that this is so is a condition of factual discourse (an aspect, as it were, of the logical geography of the concept of a belief), and so it does not involve anything other than considerations intrinsic to facts to legitimate the deduction of values, as is denied by Hume's law.
SECOND IT IS NOT AN OBJECTION TO POINT OUT THAT TRUTH IS NOT THE ONLY SOCIAL GOOD OR FALSITY THE ONLY SOCIAL ILL, SO THAT THE INFERENCE SCHEMES OF EXPLANATORY CRITIQUE MAY BE OVERRIDDEN BY OTHER CONSIDERATIONS. SCIENCE IS ONLY ONE AMONG OTHER SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS, AND TRUTH AMONG A NUMBER OF VALUES. BUT THIS DOES NOT GAINSEAY THE FACT THAT OTHER THINGS BEING EQUAL TRUTH IS GOOD AND FALSITY IS ILL. THIRD, IT IS THE CASE THAT THE INERENCE FROM THE NEGATIVE EVALUATION OF A STRUCTURE OR STATE OF AFFAIRS ACCOUNTING FOR THE FALSITY OF A BELIEF TO A POSITIVE EVALUATION OF ACTION RATIONALLY DIRECTED AT TRANSFORMING IT IS CONTINGENT UPON (I) SUBSTANTIVE THEORY AND (II) CONCRETE PRACTICAL JUDGEMENTS. THAT SOMETHING SHOULD BE DONE CETERIS PARIBUS IS UNDENIABLE; WHAT SHOULD BE DONE IS A DIFFERENT MATTER. IT IS PERHAPS THIS CONSIDERATION THAT MOTIVATES LACEY’S EMphasis ON THE IMPORTANCE OF INSIDER, SHARED, TACIT, ‘MOVEMENT-BASED’ KNOWLEDGE AS DISTINCT FROM ‘GRAND THEORY’.

Finally all these inference schemes only hold ceteris paribus, other things being equal. But this has an exact parallel in scientific discourse simpliciter. To invoke a causal law is not to say what will happen but what tends to happen or what would happen ceteris paribus. The ceteris paribus clause is a condition for moving from fact to fact in the open-systemic world to which the laws of nature transfactually apply as much as it is to moving from fact to value in the practical social world of belief, judgement and action. Where philosophical orthodoxy poses radical dichotomies, critical realism finds instead exact parallels. It is difficult not to feel that the theory of explanatory critiques has definitively refuted Hume’s law.

**Dialectic**

The dialectical phase of critical realism was initiated by the publication of DPF in 1993 (the principal themes of which were resumed in PE (1994)). This had three main objectives: (1) the dialectical enrichment of critical realism; (2) the development of a general theory of dialectic, of which Hegelian dialectic could be shown to be a special, limiting, case; (3) the generation of the rudiments of a totalizing critique of Western philosophy. DPF argued that determinate absence was the void at the heart of the Western philosophical tradition; that it was this concept that was crucial to dialectic, a concept which in the end Hegel could not sustain. It essayed a real definition of dialectic as the absenting of constraints (which could be viewed as absences) on absenting absences or ills, applicable quite generally, whether in the epistemic, ethical or ontological domains; and it adumbrated a system – of dialectical critical realism (DCR), the terms of which were themselves related dialectically. This system was composed of a first moment (1M) – of non-identity – corresponding roughly to transcendental realism; a second dialectical edge (2E), pivoting on the notion of absence and other concepts of negativity; a third level (3L), revolving around notions of totality, holistic causality and the like and a fourth dimension (4D), turning on transformative praxis, the unity of theory and
practice in practice and so on. It should be noted that even though the triadic Hegelian dialectic – of identity, negativity and totality – shared two of these terms in common, their content in the critical realist dialectic is radically different. Thus DPF argued that Hegel ultimately could not sustain real negativity and that his totalities were all essentially closed rather than open. The upshot of DPF is that the moral good, more specifically a vision of a freely flourishing society, is implicit in every expressively veracious action or remark. Moral realism is here now combined with ethical naturalism; and the theory of explanatory critique is conjoined with a very radical emancipatory axiology turning on the theoretico-practical duality of every judgement and act. There is objective good, but it cannot necessarily or normally be identified with the actually existing morality of any particular society.

The introduction to Part IV outlines some of the main themes of DPF. Here it will be sufficient to contextualize it and say a little about its structure and its relation to pre-dialectical critical realism. I have already noticed that critical realists tended to (and were in part motivated by) a reassessment of Marx as a scientific realist, at least in *Capital*. There he maintains that explanatory structures (or, in his favoured terminology, essential relations) are (a) distinct from (b) often, and even normally, out of phase with (i.e., disjoint from) and (c) perhaps in opposition to the phenomena (or phenomenal forms) they generate. But, Marx never satisfactorily theorized his scientific, as distinct from material object, realism. This, together with four other imbalances or asymmetries in his intellectual formation – viz. the under-development of (i) his critique of empiricism in comparison with his critique of idealism, (ii) of the theme of (α) objectivity as distinct from (β) labour (i.e., of the intransitive in contrast with the transitive dimension), (iii) and of normativity in relation to geo-historicity (i.e., of the intrinsic – judgmentally rational – within the extrinsic – epistemically relative – aspect of the transitive dimension) and (iv) of the research programme of geo-historical materialism in comparison with the critique of political economy, helped to account for all of (1) Marx’ mature return to Hegel, (2) the Hegelian residues in Marxist thought, (3) the ambivalences and contradictory tendencies within his writings and (4) the tendency for Marxist epistemology to fluctuate between a sophisticated idealism (roughly β without α) and a crude materialism (roughly α without β). Be that as it may, this inevitably led to the reopening of the question of the nature of the Marxian dialectic and of Marx’s relation to Hegel.

There is a remarkable consistency in Marx’s criticisms of Hegel from 1843 to 1873. These turn, formally, on Hegel’s subject–predicate inversions (including the critique of his idealistic sociology which confounds alienation and objectification, thus implicating Hegel in a metaphysical closure and betraying the presence of what Bhaskar calls ‘ontological monovalence’, i.e., the generation of a purely positive account of being, the absenting of absence which is the cardinal mistake of Western philosophy), his principle of iden-
tity (involving the reduction of being to thought, i.e., the epistemic fallacy) and his logical mysticism (including the reduction of science to philosophy, i.e., the 'speculative illusion'); and, substantively on his failure to sustain the autonomy or intransitivity of nature and the geo-historicity, i.e., the non-monovalent character, of social forms. Notoriously, Marx never realized his wish to make accessible to the ordinary human intelligence, in two or three printer's sheets, what is rational in the method which Hegel discovered and at the same time mystified. This sets the agenda for Bhaskar's project in DPF which is conceived as an essentially preservative generalization and enrichment of critical realism but a non-preservative sublation of Hegelian dialectic. Before I turn to the rational kernel and the mystical shell in the Hegelian dialectic it is worth sketching a plausible critical realist reconstruction of Marx's dialectic.

Thus: Marx understood his dialectic as scientific, because it set out to explain the contradictions in thought and the crises of socio-economic life in terms of the particularly contradictory essential relations generating them; as historical, because it was both rooted in, and (conditionally) an agent of the changes in the very relationships and circumstances it described; as critical, because it demonstrated the historical conditions of validity and limits of adequacy of the categories, doctrines and practices it explained; and as systematic, because it sought to trace the various historical tendencies and contradictions of capitalism back to certain existentially constitutive features of its mode of production. The most important of these were the contradictions between the use-value and value of the commodity, and between the concrete useful and abstract social aspects of the labour it embodies. These contradictions, together with the other structural and historical contradictions they ground, are both (a) real inclusive oppositions in that the terms or poles of the contradictions existentially presuppose each other, and (b) internally related to a mystifying form of appearance. Such dialectical contradictions do not violate the principle of non-contradiction, for they may be consistently described. Nor are they scientifically absurd, for the notion of a real inverted – or otherwise mystifying – misrepresentation of a real object, generated by the object concerned is readily accommodatable within a non-empiricist, stratified ontology in which thought is included within reality, not hypostatized.

What of the rational kernel and the mystical shell? The rational kernel of the Hegelian dialectic is essentially an epistemological learning process, in which inconsistencies are progressively remedied by resort to greater depth and/or (more generally) totality. Thus the Hegelian dialectic functions in one or other of two basic modes: (1) by bringing out what is implicit, but not explicitly articulated, in some notion; or (2) by repairing some want, lack or inadequacy in it. In either case some absence or incompleteness in the pre-existing conceptual field comes to be experienced as an inconsistency which is remedied by resort to a greater totality. This is essentially the epistemological dialectic called 'the logic of scientific discovery' presented in RTS Chapter 3
and revisited as a dialect of truth in DPF Chapter 3.2. The mystical shell of Hegelian dialectics is ontological monovalence, manifest inter alia in the absence of the concept of determinate absence, and with it of uncancelled contradiction, open totality and ongoing transformative praxis.

For DCR, dialectic is essentially the positive identification and elimination of absences, whether then conceived as argument, change or the augmentation of (or aspiration to) freedom. For these depend upon the positive identification and elimination of mistakes, states of affairs and constraints, all of which can be seen as involving or depending upon absences. Indeed absence is ontologically prior to, and the condition for, presence or positive being. It includes processes as well as states (products) and states-in-process as well as process-in-states. Moreover it opens up, in what DCR styles the dialectic of dialectical and analytical reasoning (in which dialectical reasoning overreaches but contains analytical reasoning), the critique of the fixity of the subject, in the traditional subject-predicate form. Most characteristically in the ‘identity thinking’ of the ‘analytical problematic’. Indeed it is the absence of the concept of absence in ontological monovalence that underpins the failures of traditional philosophy even at 1M.

The moments of the system of DCR will now be briefly rehearsed. 1M is characterized by non-identity relations such as those involved in the critique of the epistemic and anthropic fallacies, of identity theory and actualism. Unified by the concept of alterity, it emphasizes scientific intransitivity, referential detachment (the process whereby we detach the referent (and referential act) from that to which it refers), the reality principle and ontology which it necessitates. More concretely, 1M fastens on to the transcendentally necessary stratification and differentiation of the world, entailing concepts of causal powers and generative mechanisms, alethic truth and transfactuality, natural necessity and natural kinds. Alethic truth is the truth of, or real reason(s) for, or dialectical ground of, things as distinct from propositions. This is possible in virtue of the ontological stratification of the world and attainable in virtue of the dynamic character of science, social science, explanatory critique and emancipatory axiology. It is the concept of alethic truth that is the ground for the transcendental realist resolution of problems such as those of induction which arise from actualizing, destratifying nature (and then science) and for the explanatory critical refutation of Hume’s law.

2E is unified by the category of absence, from which as I shall shortly show the whole circle of 1M–4D links and relations can be derived. Its critical cutting edge is aimed at the Parmenidean doctrine of ontological monovalence, the Platonic analysis of negation in terms of difference and the Kantian analysis of negative into positive predicates. It spans the gamut of categories of negativity, contradiction and critique. It emphasizes the tri-unity of causality, space and time in tensed ‘rhythmic’ spatializing process, thematizing the presence of the past and existentially constitutive process. Contradictions, which fall under 2E, include internal and external, formal logical and
dialectical ones. Dialectical contradictions are mutually exclusive internally related oppositions, conveying tendencies to change. If the dialectics of 1M are most characteristically of stratification and ground, those of 2E are typically of process, transition, frontier and node; but also generally of opposition including reversal.

3L is unified by the category of totality. It pinpoints the error of ontological extensionalism, including the hypostatization of thought. It encompasses such categories and themes as reflexivity, emergence, transcendence, constellationality, holistic causality, concrete universality and singularity, internal relationality and intra-activity, but also detotalization, alienation, split and split off, ‘TINA formation’, illicit fusion and fissure. Its dialectics are of centre and periphery, form and content, figure and ground, generative separation and dealienation, retotalization in a unity-in-diversity.

4D is unified by the category of transformative praxis or agency. In the human sphere it is implicit in the other three moments. There is a special affinity with 2E, since agency is (intentional) causality, which is absenting. Agency is sustained philosophically – in opposition to dualistic disembodiment and reductionist reification – by an emergent powers materialist orientation and substantively by the concept of four-planar social being. On this generalization of critical naturalism, social life *qua* totality is constituted by four dialectically interdependent planes: of material transactions with nature, interpersonal relations, social structures and the stratification of the personality. And the moral evolution of the species, like the future generally, is conceived as open. Its dialectics are the site of ideological and material struggles, but also of absolute reason (the unity of theory and practice in practice) and it incorporates DCR’s dialectic of desire to freedom.

Let me give, by way of conclusion, an indication of how dialectical critical realism can be dialectically presented. We may start with the concept of absence, say as manifest in desire. This immediately gives us the concepts of referential detachment, existential intransitivity and thence ontology. Whence we proceed to classification and causality. With the first glimpse of ontological structure we have alethic truth and the trans factual efficacy it affords. But to cause is to negate and all negation is in space–time and so we have the entire range of 2E categories from constraint to dialectical contradiction to rhythmic spatio-temporal efficacy. The contradictions within and between entities yield emergence, and thence it is a short route to the 3L categories of totality, holistic causality and concrete universal = singular. Totality is inwardized as, _inter alia_, the reflexivity shown in judgement and the monitoring of practice. Now in the realm of 4D, in virtue of the transcendental necessity of social structure for practice, we can derive from the sole premiss of the activity-dependence of social structure, the transformational model of social activity, the relational social paradigm and the epistemological, ontological, relational and critical limits on naturalism, including the derivation of values from facts. In virtue of our intentional...
embodied agency, to act is to absent, and in desire or the solidarity implicit in the fiduciariness of the judgement form, the object of our absenting agency is constraint. Then, by the logic of dialectical universalizability, we are driven to absent all dialectically similar constraints, and then to absent constraints as such in virtue of their being dialectically similar; and finally to engage, on the basis of the progressive generalization of the concept of freedom to incorporate flourishing and potentialities for development, and the negative generalization of constraint to include ills and remediable absences generally, in the totalizing depth praxis that would usher in the eudaemonistic or good society, which in this way can be shown to be already implicit in the most elemental desire.

R.B.

Notes

1 Its publication coincides with the second Annual Conference of the Centre for Critical Realism (CCR) which is a registered educational charity designed to promote and network for critical realism; and the establishment of the International Association for Critical Realism (IACR), a democratically constituted membership body affiliated to the CCR.

2 Popular Scientific Lectures, 1894, p.192


All references in the text refer to the original books.

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