

# Virtually Real

Realism and the Human Sciences Conference, Oxford, 24-26 July 1992

Roy Bhaskar's opening paper indicated concerns which were to characterise the conference as a whole. He argued that Critical Realism needs to take on Hegelian concepts to bolster its existing epistemic mapping of the world. The notion of totality, for example, could provide a deep structure of non-objectified reality. This sense of a need to rethink was reflected in Manicas's discussion of intersubjectivity as a naturalistic phenomenon, in Soper's account of gender, nature and constructivism and in Hilary Wainwright's comments on the workers' movement as an enduring, *sedimented* structure within a culture.

Bhaskar's new preoccupation with non-objectified reality was echoed in Yilmaz Oner's paper on 'virtual' (possible) realities in particle physics. However, Oner's views on real possibility

also incorporated the idea that agency structured particle ontology, thus cutting across the domains of Critical Realism.

Papers by Judit Kiss and Alex Callinicos stressed the non-progressive character of the developments in East Europe, the stranglehold still maintained by bureaucratic layers, and the 'sideways' character of change. Gregory Elliott defended the value of labourism in exposing the excesses of capitalism in the UK.

The eclecticism of the conference revealed tensions in the project of Critical Realism. Participants seemed to be demanding from it a more 'naturalised' social world and a more 'socialised' nature than it was prepared to deliver.

Howard Feather

## LETTER

Dear *Radical Philosophy*,

Wal Suchting's paper 'Reflections upon Roy Bhaskar's "Critical Realism"' (*RP* 61) makes a number of serious criticisms of Bhaskar's philosophy. I shall focus here on one of them only, though a central one: I feel that it cannot be allowed to pass without immediate comment, since it attributes to Bhaskar views that he rejects.

The criticism that I want to take issue with is that Bhaskar's philosophy is a new version of foundationalism. Suchting does not register the fact that Bhaskar repeatedly rejects foundationalism and argues for such rejection (see, for example, the postscript to *The Possibility of Naturalism*). Granted, it is one thing to reject a position as erroneous, another to avoid falling into that error oneself. I would argue, for instance, that Wittgensteinian philosophy, which purports to be anti-foundationalist, falls into a foundationalist trap by its assertion that philosophy is not about truth and falsehood but about sense and nonsense; this lets the old foundationalist concern with certainty and dubitability in by the back door (one might call it 'negative foundationalism'), for that of which the contradiction is nonsense, appears as indubitable. However, if I were writing a critique of Wittgensteinian philosophy I would have to show how this happened *despite the Wittgensteinians' intentions*. To allege foundationalism without such a reservation strongly insinuates either explicit commitment to it, or at least unawareness of its dangers.

In fact, Bhaskar's philosophy does not seek to assign certainty and dubitability, nor yet sense and nonsense, but contingent truth and falsehood. Why then does Suchting regard it as foundationalist? The charge arises out of a discussion of transcendental arguments, which ask what must be so in order for some cognitive activity to be possible. For of course Kant *did* use such arguments in a foundationalist way, to establish synthetic *a priori* truths. So if Bhaskar's transcendental realism is just a realist inversion of Kant's transcendental idealism, must not his transcendental arguments do the same? For

anyone familiar with Althusser's work on Hegel and Marx, this question gives a sense of *déjà vu*: if Marx's dialectic is just a materialist inversion of Hegel's, must not Marx's totalities express their economic essence just as Hegel's expressed their ideal essence? No indeed, they must not, for material totalities must be structured quite unlike ideal ones. Likewise, once transcendental arguments are transposed into a realist context, they become unlike idealist ones. (On the relation of Bhaskar's views to Kant's, see Bhaskar's *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*, Chapter One, and also Chapter One of my forthcoming *Critical Realism: an Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy*.)

In fact, Bhaskar's transcendental arguments differ from Kant's in at least the following ways:

1. They take as their premises, not knowledge in general, but specific, historically actualised scientific practices.
2. Their conclusions are about features that the world contingently has, not about features that our minds necessarily impose on it.
3. Their conclusions are not *a priori* in the absolute sense, though they are relatively *a priori* in that they explain the possibility of some other knowledge.
4. Since they are not, as Kant's are, about something that 'reason produces entirely out of itself', they are fallible.
5. They are vulnerable to the competition of alternative transcendental arguments based on the same premises. While it may be possible to refute all but one extant account of how something is possible, new accounts may always be discovered. Hence the conclusions of Bhaskar's transcendental arguments share with science a provisional character. They do not claim (as I take it Kant's do) to be final revelations.

Such transcendental arguments are surely not guilty of foundationalism.

Andrew Collier