Reflections upon Roy Bhaskar's 'Critical Realism'

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'... quamquam ridentem dicere verum quid vetat?'

('... but what is to stop anyone with a smile on his face from telling the truth?')

(Horace, *Satires*, I, i, 25)

1 Introduction

1.1 Over the last fifteen years or so Roy Bhaskar has published a considerable body of work. Though it has been praised by some, and has even been influential here and there, it has not yet been the subject of a comprehensive critical scrutiny, at least in print.[1] This could not be undertaken in any great detail within the fairly brief compass of a paper like the present; but I shall attempt at least to sketch the bare outlines of such a critique.

1.2 In order to have a reasonably circumscribed presentation to discuss I shall concentrate on just one text, *Reclaiming Reality. A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (Verso, 1989), which is Bhaskar's latest work (at the time of writing) and deals with all his main and characteristic themes and positions. (All further page references, unless otherwise attributed, will be to this book.)

1.3 It is general useful, and indeed important, to distinguish between criticism *within* the terms of a general conceptual framework or 'problematic', to use contemporary jargon ('immanent' or 'internal' criticism) and criticism *of* the framework itself ('extrinsic' criticism').[2] The latter sort is most convincing when it proceeds from a developed alternative framework. However, constraints of space forbid the presentation of the latter here, so criticism of Bhaskar's doctrines will be largely of the former sort.[3]

1.4 In earlier writings Bhaskar has called his general philosophy of science 'transcendental realism' and his special philosophy of the human sciences 'critical naturalism'. He is now inclined to telescope the two and call the whole position 'critical realism' (vii, 190). Naturally, I have followed his preference here in the title of this paper, and in one of two places elsewhere, but will keep to the older terminology in referring to the constituent parts.

This is a condensation by at least two-thirds of another on the same subject (unpublished). Hence many of the formulations and arguments are unavoidably somewhat elliptical, though I hope clear enough to be understood and evaluated. The text is made up of numbered paragraphs, both for ease of reading and to facilitate critical discussion.

TRANSCENDENTAL REALISM

2 'Empiricism' and Its Critique

2.1 Though in the presentations of transcendental realism (TR henceforth) 'positivism' seems often to be used interchangeably with 'empiricism', the latter appears to be meant as the generally more inclusive term; anyway, I shall use it as such.

2.2 Empiricism is characterised within TR in two ways. In terms of its ontology, 'the world ... consists essentially of atomistic states of affairs which are constantly conjoined'. In terms of its epistemology, such states of affairs 'are known by asocial, atomistic individuals who passively sense (or apprehend)' them (8). Statements about constant conjunctions are, when true, laws.

2.3 Bhaskar brings two sets of theoretical (as distinct from political, ideological, etc.) charges against empiricism, corresponding to the above twofold distinction.

2.31 The charges against the ontology of empiricism are in turn of two main sorts.

2.311 Empiricism cannot provide a *sufficient* condition for a statement's being a law. This is shown by its incapacity to handle successfully 'the Humean problem of induction', which concerns that 'warrant' or 'guarantee' we have for 'supposing that the course of nature will not change' (38). This is, Bhaskar says, citing C. D. Broad, 'the scandal of philosophy' (30), and 'any theory of science as rational depends upon a resolution' of it (39). Empiricism interprets this basically *ontological* problem as equivalent to the problem of what 'warrant' we have for 'supposing the regularities in our experience will continue' (38) or for 'supposing some general proposition, statement or theory is true', which is an *epistemological* problem (38, 39). In fact, this is a special case of the 'epistemic fallacy' characteristic of empiricism, which is the thesis that 'ontological questions can always be reparsed in epistemological form: that is, that statements about being can always be analysed in terms of statements about our knowledge' of being (13). But empiricism cannot solve even this reformulated problem. So it cannot account for the *necessity* characteristic of laws.

2.312 Empiricism cannot provide a *necessary* condition for a statement's being a law. This is shown by its incapacity to handle successfully the question of the 'transfactuality' of laws, or the problem of 'transduction' (181), which is that of the applicability of laws outside the domain of actual experience (for example, the centre of the sun). For the constancies that law-statements record occur only within systems that are 'closed' to the influence of disturbing factors by experimental manipula-

tion, and yet we apply laws to problems pertaining to situations where experiment does not or even cannot occur. So empiricism cannot account for the *universality* of laws.

2.32 The charges against the epistemology of empiricism are also of two sorts. As we have seen, empiricism holds that knowledge is ultimately (a) of a direct, perceptual sort, which (b) occurs in the context of socially atomistic individuals. Each has an unacceptable consequence. (a') It follows from (a) that empiricism cannot account for the fact that the development of knowledge exhibits radical *discontinuities*, since directly perceptual knowledge would be simply cumulative, (b') It follows from (b) that empiricism cannot account for the fact that knowledge (in particular scientific knowledge) is a result of *social* endeavour.

3 Transcendental Realism and Empiricism

3.1 TR has both a genuine ontology (unlike the experiential pseudo-ontology of empiricism) and an epistemology.

3.11 The ontology of TR consists of: (a) events, (b) experiences of events, and (c) what are referred to differently in different places, but on p. 90 as 'structures, generative mechanisms or agents' – what I shall call compendiously, using a traditional term, 'powers'. (c) beget, in appropriate 'triggering' circumstances (a) and (a) beget, when in the appropriate relation to sentient beings, (b). Thus the ontology of TR differs *crucially* from that of empiricism with regard to (c), understood as *irreducible* items in the 'furniture of the world'. Laws record the 'tendencies' of (c) to produce (a) in certain situations. As irreducible to (a) and hence independent of (b) and indeed of consciousness in general, (c) are what Bhaskar calls the 'intransitive objects' of knowledge (called thus, presumably, because they endure through 'transitory' attempts to understand them).

3.12 According to the epistemology of TR, knowledge arises not by virtue of some direct relation between knower and known but via certain conceptual means called 'transitive objects', which are also socially evolved and applied. Experiment is the main means for discovering the existence and nature of powers through its ability to create 'closed' systems.

3.2 With the apparatus outlined in 3.1, TR is, it is argued, able to avoid both the sets of charges against empiricism outlined in 2.31.

3.21 With regard to the charges in 2.311 TR's responses are the following.

3.211 The problem of induction in a serious ontological one, the solution to which is that, since (according to TR) nature is ultimately a complex of powers, existing independently of any form of awareness, and by their very nature invariant in their operation (how could a power characterised as, say, 'that which – in appropriate circumstances – enables the scratching of glass' ever do anything but enable the scratching of glass, given those circumstances?) (40), we have a guarantee of the uniformity of nature. Or, to put the matter in terms of laws, these record the tendencies of powers to realise themselves in appropriate circumstances, and these are necessary truths about powers. So, once a power/law always a power/law, as it were.

3.212 As regards the problem of transduction, since laws are about the tendencies of powers, which are perfectly objective, and not, except very indirectly and derivatively, about the events they produce when manipulated (in particular, experimentally), there is no problem about the application of laws in situations which exclude manipulation by human beings.

3.22 The responses to the epistemological problems are these.

3.221 Since knowledge is not a matter of direct confrontation between knower and what is known (or to be known), but occurs via transitive objects, it is not only explicable, but positively to be expected, that the development of knowledge, in particular scientific knowledge, should exhibit discontinuities, as one set of transitive objects is replaced by others in the course of endeavours to grasp the character of intransitive objects.

3.222 The generation of knowledge is inherently a social affair, as many people must cooperate in the creation and use of transitive objects, experimental set-ups, and so on.

3.3 TR consists not only of an ontology and an epistemology, but also of a 'metaphilosophy'. Various things are said about this, in different ways. I shall try to systematise the main points by reference to the Aristotelian schema of the 'four causes'.

3.31 As to its 'formal cause' (given by answering the question: 'What is it?'), philosophy is ultimately a 'philosophical ontology', which consists in 'some general account of the nature of the world, to the effect that it is structured and differentiated' (150). As such it is irreducible to a 'scientific ontology', which specifies 'the structures

which, according to the science of the day, it [*sc* the world – WC] contains and the particular way in which they are differentiated' (150). TR as a 'metaphysical realism' consists of 'an elaboration of what the world must be prior to any scientific investigation of it' (12). Or, perhaps better, it is an account of what the world must be like *if* any scientific investigation of it is to be possible: philosophy is a determination of 'the necessary conditions of conceptualised activities' (14).

3.32   This already foreshadows philosophy's 'material cause' (given by answering the question: 'From what is it made?'), since, if its content is as just indicated in 3.31, then it must take 'as its premises scientific activities as conceptualised in experience (or in a theoretical redescription of it)' (14), it must be 'the analyst of intelligible activities' (22).

3.33   What is said in 3.331 also foreshadows philosophy's 'efficient cause' (given by answering the question: 'How is it made?'). If philosophy is a body of propositions not identical with any scientific one, it must have a distinctive method (14), which, since that of science is *a posteriori*, must be *a priori* (14), consisting in the establishment of the conditions for the possibility of 'conceptualised', 'intelligible' activities; in other words, philosophy's method is 'transcendental in Kant's sense' (14).

3.34   Philosophy's 'final cause' (given by answering the question: 'For the sake of what is it made?') is, in effect, the subject of a number of different formulations. There is space for citing at most two passages. One occurs in the first paragraph of the last and latest chapter in the book, and can also be found almost word for word in the first paragraph of the preface. The author says that he is concerned with the form of the realism required 'to aid and empower the sciences, and especially the human sciences, insofar as these illuminate and inform projects of human emancipation' (180). This may be supplemented by some words from the beginning of the first essay: '... philosophy ... is the discipline that has traditionally underwritten both what constitutes science or knowledge and which political practices are deemed legitimate' (1). Putting these formulations together it may be said compendiously that the point of philosophy is to increase the power of the sciences, particularly the human sciences, as they bear on the political programme of liberation, by 'underwrit[ing]' the former and 'legitimat[ing]' the latter. The two terms thus picked out may be taken to come to the same thing, for to underwrite is to provide a guarantee for something, a warrant, to make or show that something is legitimate, that is, in accordance with or has the character of a law (*legis*), or a right (*juris*), to show that something is not only de facto but also *de jure*. So the ultimate aim of philosophy is to guarantee or justify, and to do this for, in the first instance, knowledge. To answer the question as to how this is to be done we may call on other passages. For example, any theory of knowledge 'must logically presuppose a theory of what the world is like for knowledge ... to be possible' (13), and such a theory is a (philosophical) ontology (49). So the point of philosophy, so far as knowledge is concerned anyway, is to guarantee or justify the latter by reference to the general nature of the world.

At the same time, Bhaskar stresses that realism, *qua* philosophy, 'is not, nor does it license, either a set of substantive analyses or a set of practical policies. Rather, it provides a set of perspectives on society and nature and on how to understand them. It is not a substitute for, but rather helps to guide, empirically controlled investigations into the structures generating ... phenomena' (3). To cite other formulations, philosophy is, in the words of Locke to which Bhaskar subscribes, 'employed as an under-labourer in clearing the ground a little, and removing some of the rubbish that lies in the way to knowledge'; it is 'an analyst and potential critic of conceptual systems and the forms of social life in which they are embedded' (2), so that 'it can

sustain a critical orientation ... to the existing practice of a science ... can criticise [its] lack of scientificity' (18) and even act as 'occasional midwife to the sciences' (24).

4   On the Ontology of Transcendental Realism

4.1   We have seen that the key idea in the ontology of TR is that of what I have called 'power'. This being so, it is not a little surprising that next to nothing is to be found in the book being examined (nor anywhere else in Bhaskar's writings for that matter) by way of elucidation of the notion. Certainly some such idea is pervasive in quotidian, and even in informal parts of scientific language (for example, 'lethal', 'perishable', 'magnetic', 'produce', 'suffer'). But it is present in a quite 'spontaneous' form, and its being there does not, by itself, guarantee that it has an irreducible meaning or even that it refers at all (compare, for example, 'average man' or intentional language applied to inanimate or abstract objects). So a clear understanding of it cannot simply be assumed.

4.2   What *is* said is not of much help. As we have seen, powers are said to be 'structures, generative mechanisms or agents'. The second and third characterisations are just intuitive synonyms, whilst the first poses a puzzle of its own. For, strictly, 'structure' signifies a set of *relations* between a set of elements, and powers are presumably *properties* of elements, which are not themselves relations. The traditional view just assumed is indicated by talk of 'real essences' captured in 'real definitions' (e.g. 85, 190). But, whilst powers as thus traditionally conceived have been taken to be related to their effects by 'logical necessity', Bhaskar says that it is a question of 'natural necessity' (12, 17, 52, 154, 173). But as to what this is supposed to be – 'the rest is silence'.[4] So it seems that all that is said of the basic concept in the ontology of TR is that a power is a power is a power.

4.3   It is not difficult to think of 'dialectical' arguments (in the 'Socratic' sense) against the idea of power: For instance, there is a traditional distinction between 'active' and 'passive' powers (a match has a power to burn, but it can actually burn only something with a power to be burnt).[5] Something which is said to have a power must then surely have the power to have that power, and so on *ad infinitum*. This is not a *vicious* regress. But it is, to say the least, somewhat curious that the existence of an infinite sequence of properties should be a presupposition of the existence of one property, so that the truth of a proposition about the former follows from that of one about the latter (a sort of Ontological Argument for the Existence of Powers). Of course, the sequence might be cut short at some point by claiming that there must be an ultimate power. But this is an at least equally curious conclusion, and not only smacks of arbitrariness, but suggests the question as to why powers should be assumed at all. For if at some point we must say that something just *is* the case why not do so to start with and simply say that there is a regular concomitance between events? (The analogy here is with the Argument from/to Design for the existence of God.) Note that this is not meant as a defence of a 'regularity' theory or 'dispositions', laws or whatever (like Bhaskar, but largely for different reasons, I regard such an account as untenable[6]). Yet these sorts of arguments tend, as Hume said of Berkeley's, to 'admit of no answer and produce no conviction', to be, in Kant's words this time, 'mock combats [*Spielgefechte*]'.[7] Instead, let us turn to a consideration of how the notion of power is *used* within TR, *however that notion is understood*; for the problem of determining what Bhaskar actually means by it, if anything, is probably best given up as a bad job (in advance of future elucidations). In this new line of questioning we shall have to refer also to the epistemological doctrines of TR already presented.

4.4 According to TR, introducing the notion of power permits the solution of the problem of induction, understood properly as an ontological problem, as distinct from the empiricist understanding of it as epistemological, concerning the future course of experiences or the truth-value of general statements. Prescinding from the point that these two formulations are in fact quite distinct, and concentrating on the second, it is clear enough that TR is in no better boat than empiricism. For even if the supposition of the existence of powers were to give a 'warrant', 'guarantee', or whatnot, to beliefs about what is not yet observed (it would not, but that is another story), since, for TR, knowledge about the world is always via transitive objects, TR no less than empiricism is faced with the problem of assessing evidence for the truth-value of statements (of various degrees of generality). So 'the problem of induction', *once posed*, may be expelled from the *empiricist* epistemological field by the ontological pitchfork of TR, but it keeps coming back in its *own* epistemological backyard. Of the use of 'powers' here Wittgenstein might have asked: 'isn't the engine idling?'. We are simply offered what Hegel used to call 'assurances [*Versicherungen*]'.[8]

4.5 If the preceding argumentative point has been taken, then it is not necessary to labour the point that TR can no more solve the 'problem of transduction' than that of induction, for the ascription of powers to non-'closed' systems must be made on the basis of evidence derived from work on 'closed' systems, which is also the evidential basis for alternative interpretations of scientific knowledge of these, including empiricist ones. So 'transduction' does not introduce any basically new factor into the debate.

5 On the Epistemology of Transcendental Realism

5.1 Readers of Bhaskar's book who also know something of Althusser may well be reminded, on first meeting with the former's distinction between 'intransitive objects' and 'transitive objects' of the latter's distinction between 'real objects' and 'theoretical objects'/'objects of theory'. Indeed, such a reader might be forgiven for thinking that the two terminologies mark essentially the same conceptual distinction. But Bhaskar forthrightly rejects such an identification (e.g. 188) and criticises Althusser at a number of places. Since I do not have the space to demonstrate this point, I simply register my opinion that the discussions are utterly confused. I shall restrict myself to taking up what is probably his main point – namely that Althusser's epistemology is basically idealist – not because Bhaskar's argument on this point is of any special value, but because it is not much worse than an immense number of similar ones, and so may contribute to a more general discussion. It will also be an invaluable background for a 'depth' analysis of TR and its vicissitudes.

5.2 Bhaskar does not cite Althusser in this regard, but various passages from the latter are part of the stock-in-trade of Althusser-criticism – they are guaranteed to disarm philosophers – at least the 'realists': 'The production ... of knowledge, and hence that of its object ... takes place entirely in knowledge ... in thought.' '*Theoretical practice* is ... its own criterion ... the sciences ... once truly constituted and developed ... have no need for verification from *external* practices.' '... this radical inwardness of the criterion of practice for scientific practice.'[9] Since commentators on Althusser seem generally to have had insuperable difficulties in understanding such passages, I shall first discuss them in terms of a simple, everyday example, even if this does not occur anywhere in Althusser's own writings.

Consider proceedings in a court of law. Let us assume, for purposes of discussion, that the question before the court is the determination of the guilt or otherwise of someone charged with murder. In terms appropriate to the present context we may describe the situation as one of the production of a certain result, a verdict, from certain 'raw materials', like the testimony of witnesses, material exhibits, forensic evidence, and so on, using certain 'means of production' such as cross-examination and re-enactments of events. Now this process takes place entirely 'in knowledge', 'in thought', it is characterised by 'radical inwardness', in the sense that it occurs entirely within the context of a set of intra-legal norms and procedures. This is the case at least from the time of laying of the charge, which is intelligible only within a set of legal concepts; indeed, the laying of the charge may well be the result of a previous series of proceedings. The 'raw materials' are in general at least in large part before the court in the form of representations of ordinary life. The 'working up' of such materials proceeds according to the legally defined rules of court-functioning (rules of evidence, principles prescribing the conduct of judges, of deliberations by the jury, and so on). A verdict is properly so called if and only if the relevant procedures have been correctly followed in reaching it. The producers of production of the verdict neither requires nor allows any intrusion of 'external practices', such as newspaper stories, results of extra-judicial inquiries, and the like – though of course, material of such provenance can be introduced once it has been appropriated by legal procedures. Even the results of purely scientific procedure have to conform to legal norms to count as 'forensic evidence'. But there is obviously nothing here to give aid and comfort to idealism. The raw materials have their origins in ordinary perception, in familiar material processes, a verdict may be overturned on appeal or retrial involving 'inputs' from 'external practices', the legal norms and procedures themselves may be the subject-matter of socio-historical explanation and be changed as a result of broader social changes.

All this is pretty obviously applicable, appropriately modified, to experiment, which Althusser himself calls 'the criterion of the theory of the "experimental" sciences ... the form of their theoretical practice'.[10] Everything that enters into an experimental situation *qua* experimental does so only within the terms of a conceptual-procedural framework. One of the raw materials enters, say, not as a heap of powder of a certain colour, texture, etc., but as a sample of such and such a chemical compound of a certain degree of purity as established by certain standardising procedures, and so on. The instrumentation is constructed in terms of certain theoretical principles and has to be used in certain ways, and no others. The readings of the instruments will generally have to be corrected, using various empirical principles, statistical techniques and the like. In this sense, the experiment takes place entirely in knowledge, in thought, the theoretical practice of a science that employs experiment has no need of verification from practices external to the one it has itself constituted in its experiments, the criterion of practice is, in this sense, 'radically inward'. It should go without saying that none of this is inconsistent with (indeed it depends upon) the science's being ultimately about something other than itself considered as a body of statements, rules of inference, and such like; that is, about real objects which supply the causal input and ultimately determines the outcome of the experiment. But it is crucial not to confuse the domain of knowledge and the domain of things: what the latter is like is what ultimately counts, but it can count only through, and by means of the former, as nothing here 'speaks for itself'. To say that the real object is only cognitively accessible through some set of representations that are related to that real object in and through interactions in a practice is obviously not to say that the real objects are existentially dependent on the cognitive order or that the latter is some sort of veil behind which the natural

order is hidden. That we cannot eat an apple without biting pieces off it, chewing it, swallowing it, without our digestive tract working on it, and so on, hardly means that we never really eat apples, but only experience internal states of ourselves, or whatever!

5.3 Now the main *theoretical* thrust of Althusser's position here was against the idea that the knowledge-situation is one in which a relation is set up between two terms, the knower ('subject') and what is to be known ('object') such that the former reflects (mirrors, represents) something about the object.[11] One of his basic objections to this is its ultimate idealism: a representation can only be of something of a similar nature to itself, and so the object of the representation must be conceived of as having the character of knowledge itself, lodged, as it were, in the object in general, like Nothung in the tree-stump, to be freed by the knowing Siegfried. There are, of course any number of variants of this fundamental picture. In forms of 'direct realism' there is an unmediated relation between subject and object. In some of these positions traditionally known as 'empiricism', the relation is mediated by sense-perceptions which are cognitively transparent, as it were. From this, it is but a very short stop to the picture of perceptions that are 'theory-laden', hence turbid with assumptions of human provenance. And the piquant figure of this situation is that proponents of the latter generally think that they are rebelling against old-fashioned empiricism/positivism, when their range of positions is really just another variant of the same basic framework. So when Bhaskar presents the idea of 'transitive objects' as an alternative to empiricism, this cannot be taken at face value, and indeed nothing he says suggests that it is anything but a new brand of what used to be (and no doubt still is, in some backwaters) a trendy version of the old epistemological problematic. Apart from the idealism, the incoherence of the latter was already brilliantly revealed in the first few paragraphs of the introduction to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where, in brief, it is pointed out that the accuracy of the representation could only be checked by gaining access to the object independent of representations, that is, by knowing about it without knowing. Althusser's conception rejects the framework completely, for knowing is always a matter of comparing the results of appropriating the object in various cognitive-instrumental ways. So the relation-to-the-object is already included in the result of inquiry and there is no further question of *that* but only of the comparative adequacies to similar problems of different results of appropriation. As Goethe once said in a related regard, there is an almost irresistible urge to ask about what lies 'behind' the result;[12] but this is simply a result of being in the grip of a certain picture of knowing.

But we are already involved in 'metaphilosophical' questions, and to these we now turn explicitly.

6 On the Metaphilosophy of Transcendental Realism

6.1 We have already seen (para. 3.33) that Bhaskar says that philosophy's (that is, his) method is 'transcendental in Kant's sense'. Now this is, at best, crucially ambiguous. It could refer to (a) the most general, formal structure of Kant's transcendental method; that is, roughly, an argument from an assumed 'A', to the necessary and sufficient conditions 'B', postulated for 'A' to be the case. Or it could refer to (b) the specific use Kant made of it, in the first place in the paradigmatic first *Critique*; namely, to determine the necessary and sufficient conditions for the possibility of there being a knowable world at all, that there should be 'experience'. Now Bhaskar never attempts anything like (b), so we must assume that his reference to Kant in effect concerns (a).

What then are we to take as 'A'? Let us say science as such. But the history of ideas records many different conceptions of what constitutes 'science'.[13] But can one of these be non-arbitrarily selected *a priori* as specially privileged? Of course, it is possible to attempt simply to determine the most general principles which have governed various activities historically called 'scientific'.[14] But such results would not have any metaphysical-normative force of the sort Bhaskar desires. Conclusions: a 'transcendental deduction' of this sort is either dogmatic/circular, or merely historical in import. Suppose then we take 'A' to be, say, experimental science. The choice of this as the subject-matter of deduction will still require independent justification of a non-'transcendental' sort, but perhaps some metaphysical 'foundation' can be 'deduced' for the experimental aspect. To make things simpler and more favourable to the idea of a 'transcendental deduction', let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that it is possible to infer *sufficient* 'conditions for the possibility' of experiment. But what about *necessary* ones? Suppose someone who holds that a sufficient condition (at least) for the possibility of experimental science is the existence of natural powers (detail is not necessary here) is confronted by an Occasionalist who holds that the possibility of experiment really depends on the existence of a *bon Dieu* who always matches experimental procedure and experimental result, so that the first always appears to be, but really is not the causal effect of the other. Bhaskar says in a passage that is relevant here: 'I do not claim that my analyses are certain or unique (though they are the only plausible analyses I know of)' (15). The part of the sentence before the parenthesis is no other than astonishing when read in the light of the frequently repeated claim that 'transcendental deduction' is an *a priori* procedure: how could the latter *not* be both certain and unique? But let that pass. The part of the sentence within the parenthesis suggests the question: 'plausible to *whom*?', since presumably something is not just plausible *per se*. In this case, the claim of plausibility is presumably not meant just as an autobiographical remark, but as an implicit appeal to an assumed consensus of all and, more precisely, a consensus of the scientifically inclined. But this is just to presuppose the adequacy of the transcendental, 'warrant' for which is supposedly being demonstrated. In fact one is reminded of what Descartes wrote in the letter of dedication of his *Meditations* ('To those most learned and distinguished men, the Dean and Doctors of the sacred Faculty of Theology at Paris') where he says that, as Christians, 'we must believe in the existence of God because it is a doctrine of Holy Scripture, and conversely, that we must believe Holy Scripture because it comes from God', though, he adds, 'this argument cannot be put to unbelievers because they would judge it to be circular'.

6.2 The conclusion to be drawn from the above is that Bhaskar's idea of a 'foundation' for knowledge (*inter alia*) which warrants, justifies, legitimates, guarantees the latter, in particular a 'philosophical ontology', is just one more avatar of a traditional aim of philosophy (indeed it is partly *constitutive* of the latter as a distinctive discipline) – whether the foundation be thought of as the Will of God, sense-data, transcendental apperception, *Wesenschau*, or whatever. Like all the others, it is hit off by the devastating image that Wittgenstein used in discussing one particular area: 'The *mathematical* problems of what is called foundations are no more the foundation of mathematics for us than the painted rock is the support of a painted tower.'[15] Looked at most charitably, the idea is probably the result of a confusion between the basic concepts and principles *with* which or *according to* which a practice proceeds, on the one hand, and, on the other, concepts and principles *from* which (as it were) it proceeds. It is as if one thought of a dictionary of a natural language as the 'foundation' of its vocabulary, rather than as the

codification of usage at a certain time from a certain point of view; or its syntax as having a similar relation to actual patterns of formation of phrases and sentences from words.

6.3 It may be added that the traditional picture of knowing alluded to above (para. 5.3) leads irresistibly to the project of specifying 'foundations'. For if particular items of knowledge involve an alignment between the thing and the idea of the thing in the particular case, there must surely be general truths, logically prior to, and independent of any particular item of knowledge about the conditions under which that alignment obtains; and these are precisely the 'foundations' provided by one philosophy or another. But the whole idea is a mere chimera conjured up by a wrong way of looking at knowledge.

6.4 I have suggested above that Bhaskar's doctrines as so far examined share with empiricism the traditional 'problematic' of epistemology. Their continuity with traditional philosophy has further emerged in the discussion of his foundationalism. Now the surest index of a problematic is the sort of *questions* it licenses, either by explicitly posing them, or by affirming what can only be interpreted as answers to certain implicitly presupposed questions. That TR and empiricism, though allegedly opponents, really belong in principle to the same problematic is revealed by the fact that both take certain questions to be genuine, and indeed serious ones. Here the most obvious cases are the questions of induction and 'transduction'. That empiricism cannot solve them is not taken by TR as a sign of something's being amiss with the problematic that generated them, but as a challenge to offer adequate answers. That it cannot do so, as we have seen, is only further evidence, if such is needed, that the common framework is flawed in principle, and that the 'problems' it generates offer challenges not for their solution but for their dissolution.

CRITICAL NATURALISM

7 Critical Naturalism: Preliminary Remarks

'Critical naturalism' ('CN' henceforth) is a philosophy of social theory of science which presents it as generated by the application of the fundamental ideas of TR to the domain of society' or, put otherwise, it is the social-philosophical aspect of 'critical realism'. It is set out in the book being examined in the form of a set of substantive positions – by the *via affirmativa* as it were, but also in part by the *via negativa* of the way in which TR, as exemplified in the natural sciences, has to be qualified in the social domain. These qualifications concern ontological, epistemological, 'relational' and 'critical' features. I shall say something about the first three only, since the fourth is merely asserted, leaving no real room for argument. Still, I shall have to be even more expositively and critically abstemious here than before, though the consequences of this are somewhat mitigated by the fact that there is at least a small amount of critical literature on this area.[16]

8 On the Ontology of Critical Naturalism

8.1 The crucial idea in the ontology of TR is that of what I have called 'power'. As so far understood, it has at least two 'ontological' characteristics: (a) it is a property of a situation, which property is marked out by its tendency to produce certain specific sorts of effects, and (b) it exists independently of any forms of human awareness.

8.2 The 'analogue' (78) of natural powers in the field of society is 'social structures' (78). What is *distinctive* about CN is

that it is a 'relational conception' (7). This distinguishes social powers from natural powers as characterised in para 8.1(a) above. (For further on this point see, e.g., 3, 4, 93). What do the relations hold *between*? This is not crystal clear, but it would seem to be between *persons*, for it is said that material objects' being social in character (as well as simply material) 'consists only in the relationships between persons or between such relationships and nature *that such objects causally presuppose or entail*' (81 – emphasis added). Though the formulation is hardly pellucid, it appears to mean that any relationship between interpersonal relationships and nature stems from the causal character of objects *qua* objects, so that the interpersonal relationships are the fundamental ones as regards the constitution of specifically social subject-matter. Let us register these results as: (CN-1a) Social powers are relations, and (CN-1b) the relations are primarily interpersonal. The second point distinguishes social powers from natural powers as characterised in para 8(b) above.

This last position is emphasised in two further formulations which may be listed thus. (CN-2a) '... social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the activities they govern' (79). (CN-2b) '... social structures, unlike natural structures, do not exist independently of the agents' conceptions of what they are doing in their activity' (79). Further, we may list as (CN-3): 'social structures, unlike natural structures, may be only relatively enduring (so that the tendencies they ground may not be universal in the sense of space-time invariant)' (79).

The following are also distinguishable theses, though some of them clearly are, and some might be made out to be, corollaries of the preceding, or of one of the others. (CN-4): CN is an anti-individualist social theory (70-73). (CN-5) CN is an anti-collectivist social theory (73). (Collective phenomena are reducible to 'expressions of enduring relationships'.) Though (CN-2), human activities are always subject to the structuring and hence constraining effects of certain social structures/relations. Therefore (CN-6): CN is opposed to all forms of voluntarism (176f.). Nevertheless, since (CN-2_, (CN-7): CN is opposed to all forms of reification/determinism (93). (CN-4 may be paired with CN-6 and CN-5 with CN-7). The result of all this is termed 'the transformational model of social activity' (e.g. 77), that is, social change occurs by virtue of the agency of human beings' acting to restructure restructures/relations in which they find themselves at some time.
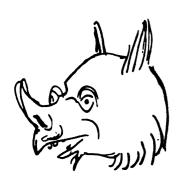
8.3 I shall now make some brief critical comments on these positions, starting with (CN-1). As regards (CN-1a), it is completely opaque how a power could be said to *consist in* relations (as distinct from, say, revealed in/identified by them). For example, the power of gravity ('to speak with the vulgar', as Berkeley says, even if we 'think with the learned') varies with change in a relation (distance), but the varying effects are due to the power and not to the spatial relations. Thus (CN-1a) must be supplemented with something else, here (CN-1b). But whence do these person-terms derive their powers? Are they inherent? In this case we would be in individualist country, contrary to (CN-4). Are they relational? In this case we would be back to where we started. Do they derive from some supra-individual totality? But this would be contrary to (CN-5).

8.4 (CN-2a) is unclear. If it means that social structures do not exist unless they are governing relevant activities in fact, then it is plainly false: for example, much of the life of almost any society just 'free-wheels' along the road of habit, custom, and so on (what Marx called 'second nature'). Of course, it is true that, say, an institution is generally identified in terms of at least its *potential* functions of governing certain activities. But this is trivially true, and, moreover, even natural powers are generally identified in terms of what they effect ('solvent') or how they are affected ('soluble').

8.5 If (CN-2a) means that the agent of an action must have a *veridical* conception of that action in order to *be* an agent, then it is obviously false. If it means only that for someone to be said to 'act' ('behave') rather than just be in some state of motion (stepping on to the road rather than being jostled on it) the person must have some conception of what s/he is doing (intention, goal, motive, or whatever) then it is true, though trivially so.

8.6 (CN-3) is false on two counts anchored severally in the two parts of the sentence quoted. Firstly, natural structures are not necessarily non-relatively enduring. Consider many geological structures. Even 'ultimate' elements of the natural world (sub-atomic items) often last only a very short time and are often the quite temporary products of human manipulation. Secondly, what is said within the parentheses confuses: (i) the question of the universality of the *relation* asserted by a law; and (ii) the question of the universality of the *spatio-temporal distribution of instances* in the antecedent of the law. The two are logically independent (and indeed a 'law' may be true without having any instances at all).

8.7 Finally, with regard to the positions bearing on social change, namely, (CN-6) and (CN-7) – and the associated (CN-4) and (CN-5) – CN in fact leaves social change a mystery. For the alleged ultimate items in the ontology of CN, namely, relations, presumably cannot change just by themselves: change musts occur by virtue of the actions of their terms, namely, people. But we are told that people can act only within the constraints of the relations within which they find themselves, which suggests determinism, though we are also told that relations *can* be changed by people, which suggests that they are not, after all, entirely constrained by these relations, which suggests voluntarism, which is, however, ruled out. In fact we are back with the pre-Marxist conundrum presented by Marx, and solved in principle in the third of the *Theses on Feuerbach*, namely, how people who are determined by their 'circumstances' can themselves change the latter.[17]

9 On the 'Relational' Specificity of Social Subject-Matter in Critical Naturalism

9.1 There seem to be at least two different positions involved here, and each offers difficulties of interpretation, an analysis of which will have to be omitted here in favour of my assuming in each case the one that I take is meant. These positions may be put in the author's words as follows. [1] '... social theory and social reality are causally interdependent. This is ... to say that social theory is practically conditioned by, and potentially has practical consequences in society.' (5); '... the objects of social scientific knowledge, although ... independently real ... are causally interdependent with the knowledge of which they are the objects.' [2] '... the social sciences are part of their own field of inquiry ... so that they are *internal* with respect to their subject matter in a way in which natural science is not' (84).

9.2 [1] is true. But what has it to do with the 'limits of naturalism' in social theory? On the one hand, any theory is conditioned by reality in the sense of being dependent upon it for its subject-matter and ultimate source of evaluation. Also, any theory, those of the natural sciences included, works in and through ideologies. So there are no significant differences between social science and natural science here. On the other hand, any theory is any science can, and many have, had consequences in society. So what is all the fuss about?

9.3 [2] is true in the sense that, for example, a theory in social science may attempt to explain the origin and development of some, or even all theories in social science in a way in which a theory in physics, say, would not attempt to explain the origin and development of theories in physics. But it would be somewhat eccentric to describe this situation as a 'limit' of *any* sort on social science.

10 On the Epistemology of Critical Naturalism

10.1 Para. 8.1 listed two 'ontological' characteristics of 'natural' powers which Bhaskar alleges are not characteristics of social powers (paras. 8, 9 above). Now there is a third characteristic of social powers, of an epistemological type: (c) such powers can be isolated, identified and studied in closed systems by means of experiment. But, according to Bhaskar: 'because social systems are intrinsically open and cannot be artificially closed, our criteria for the empirical testing of social theories cannot be predictive and so must be exclusively explanatory' (5). This invites a large number of objections of which I shall list just the following on the grounds of their being both

decisive and susceptible of being put briefly.

10.2 In fact predictions about social systems are made, and indeed regularly. See, for example, actuarial tables for insurance purposes or stock market forecasts. So being a statement about social subject-matter does not entail that it cannot be the basis of a rational prediction.

10.3 Nor does the converse entailment hold, for many clearly natural scientific theories have been or still are non- or minimally predictive. See the histories of, at the large end of the scale, cosmogony/cosmology, at the smaller end, geology, and at the smaller still, the theory of evolution which, at least as first presented by Darwin, depended for its immense scientific persuasiveness almost entirely on the wonderful coherence it lent to otherwise isolated facts, and the simplicity of the general principle underlying such explanations. So, even were it true that social theory is essentially non-predictive, this would not mark it off from natural science.

10.4 No argument whatever is given for the claim that social systems are 'intrinsically' open, and so 'cannot' be closed. Furthermore, the history of the sciences shows that primarily explanation-oriented sciences often *become* predictive through the development of new techniques (computer modelling procedures, carbon-dating, and so on), despite the pronouncements of philosophy *ex cathedra* about what is 'intrinsically' this or that and hence 'cannot' be done.

10.5 A final consideration is in a sense the most crucial, for it goes to the very heart of Bhaskar's whole programme. *What is to be said about a doctrine that on the one hand claims to be devoted to 'projects of human emancipation'* (para. 3.34 above) *and on the other denies that social theory can be predictive, that is, aimed at the future, rather than explanatory, that is, aimed at has been or is the case?* Is there anyone who needs to have spelled out the premise or two that would permit the deduction of a formal contradiction here?

11 Concluding Remarks on the 'Limits of Naturalism'

11.1 As we have seen, CN is the result of an attempt to determine, by *a priori* philosophical means, proceeding from the general principles of TR, 'the' 'foundations' of social science. The procedure largely consists in trying to determine the 'limits' of the applicability of 'the' methodology of natural science to the domain of social phenomena. What is presented is to a great extent obscure. Where it is not obscure, it is at least very deeply puzzling (e.g. 'powers' as relations), trivially true, or substantive but false. What are regarded as 'limits' of 'naturalism' are generally just uninteresting statements about *differences* between natural and social subject-matter (e.g. that the existence of the former does not depend on human beings whilst the existence of the latter does). Where there is what would genuinely be a 'limit' had a case been made out (the matter of the place of explanation and prediction) there is no argument at all; and if the limit had been established then it would have contradicted the whole point of the enterprise of CN.

11.2 Of more general significance than the particular flaws is the question of the fundamental defect of the whole procedure of arriving at 'the' methodology of 'social science'. This is, briefly, to start with certain assumptions about social subject-matter, established prior to specific scientific theories, and to infer from them, allegedly *a priori*, what the methodology of those particular theories must be. But this precludes from the start (if the procedure is followed consistently) scientific criticism of those initial assumptions, so that the whole proceeding is in principle dogmatic and methodologically obscurantist. Prop-

erly considered, neither 'subject-matter' nor 'methodology' is absolutely prior with respect to the other: at most, one may be *contextually* prior. What happens in the actual constitution of a science is that a roughly delimited subject-matter is first handled with whatever means are available. The resulting theories, to the extent that they prove satisfactory, suggest improved methods, which in turn permit the construction of better theories, and so on. (Of course, this is simplified. There may, for example, be imports of methodologies from other domains. But I am concerned here only with the central point.) There is no *a priori* reason for thinking that, even at one time, this leapfrogging of 'substantive' ??? and 'methodological' factors will yield any single methodology over a whole domain; indeed no such reason to think that there must be any one item appropriately called 'social science' – except at a very high, unenlightening and maybe misleading level of generality – rather than a perhaps interlocking body of 'social sciences'. In fact, exactly the same holds for 'natural science', rather than 'natural sciences'. Finally, the very contrast, natural versus social sciences, is not one that can simply be taken for granted. For it may well be that 'natural sciences' and 'social sciences' interlock by virtue of more or less complex similarities and differences, and that even the way this is changes over time.

12 General Conclusion

None of this is allowed for in a foundationalist philosophy of the sort which is exemplified by innumerable doctrines in the history of philosophy. Bhaskar's is just a recent example, which has probably attracted a little attention by virtue of its 'realism' as contrasted with the debilitating positivism which for a longtime held the field of philosophy in science, and for its 'Marxist' pretensions. But in the end all such foundationalists are, as Spengler said of certain modern artists, 'acrobats who bustle about with hundred-kilo weights made of cardboard'.[18]

Notes

1   Chalmers (1988) is oriented more towards general metaphysical issues; Albury, Payne, Suchting (1981) and Benton (1981) more towards issues of social theory. Bhaskar (1989) responds to the first and third. I was able to read this only after I had effectively finished the present paper. But I have nothing to change as a result of having read it, as there is nothing there but more of the same.

2   Cf. Marx's distinction between 'vulgar criticism' on the one hand and 'true' or 'genuine' criticism on the other in his 1843 critique of parts of Hegel's *Philosophie des Rechts*: Marx-Engels, *Collected Works 3* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), 91 (= *Werke* [Berlin: Dietz, 1956ff] 1: 296).

3   For more detailed discussions of certain issues see mainly Suchting (1983), (1986), (1991).

4   For a criticism of one account, which is at least worked out sufficiently to come to grips with, see Nerlich and Suchting (1967) and Suchting (1969). For a demolition of necessitarian approaches in general see now Van Fraassen (1989).

5   See Aristotle's distinction between *dynamis tou poiein* and *dynamis tou paschein* in *Met.* IX, 1-6 and Locke's between 'power ... to make, or ... to receive any change' (*Essay*, II, xxi.2).

6   I earlier on criticised the regularity theory in my paper 'Regularity and Law', *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Vol. XIV (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1974). These criticisms were made from within a problematic I now reject, but were damaging to the account being criticised. Pretty much definitive criticisms of the regularity theory, also from within the problematic of laws, will be found in D. M. Armstrong, *What is a Law of Nature?*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and M. Tooley, *Causation. A Realist Approach* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987). A rejection of the problematic of laws will be found in Suchting (1991) and, from a different point of view, Van Fraassen (1989).

7   Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Sect. XXI, Part I, note to penultimate paragraph; Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxv.

8   Hegel, for example, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Miller, p. 49.

9   Althusser and Balibar (1970), pp. 41, 59, 60.

10   Althusser and Balibar (1970), p. 59; also Althusser (1969), p. 184 note 2).

11   This characterisation of epistemology in the mainline received sense can also be found in, for example, Karl Mannheim's excellent early study (1922/1953). For the various choices within this scheme, as well as the *aporiai* (to use the author's own term) in the straightforward realist epistemology that he defends (in the context of the belief, shared by TR, that 'epistemology' is founded upon 'ontology') see the comprehensive exposition in Hartmann (1925).

12   Goethe to Eckermann, 18 February 1829 – *GesprÑche* (Insel ed.) I, p. 298.

13   See, for example, Bîhme (1980).

14   These are what Collingwood (1940) calls 'absolute presuppositions'.

15   *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), p. 1713 (para. 13).

16   See note 1 above.

17   The root of the trouble here (and indeed in many places elsewhere) is the taking of *relations* as fundamental, which locates the account within the same problematic as individualism (different choices within the conception of society seen as *individuals-in-relations*), instead of *practices*. See my (1983), Chs. 12 and 17.

18   Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Munich: Beck, 1980), p. 378. (The English version – *The Decline of the West*, I, p. 294 – is an inadequate paraphrase.)

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