Cultural System or Norm Circles?[1]

An Exchange

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Abstract

This paper takes the form of a debate between the two authors on the social ontology of propositional culture. Archer applies the morphogenetic approach, analysing culture as a cycle of interaction between the Cultural System and Socio-Cultural Interaction. In this model, the Cultural System is comprised of the objective content of intelligibilia, as theorised by Karl Popper with his concept of objective World 3 knowledge. Elder-Vass agrees that culture works through an interplay between subjective belief and an external objective moment, but argues that the external moment cannot take the form of 'objective knowledge' as this is understood by Popper. Instead, the external moment of culture takes the form of normative pressures exerted by groups of people: *norm circles*. Ultimately both authors share a commitment to a similar critical realist ontological framework, while offering alternative accounts of the nature of culture within that framework.

Keywords: critical realism; culture; morphogenetic approach; objective knowledge; Popper

Cultural System or Norm Circles?: An Exchange

This paper takes the form of a debate between two prominent critical realist sociologists over the nature of culture.

Margaret Archer is currently moving from the University of Warwick to Ecole Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne, to found a Centre for Social Ontology whose first project will concern the conceptualization of morphogenetic/morphostatic processes in the natural and social sciences. She is well known for a series of major books outlining her morphogenetic and emergentist approach to structure, culture, and agency (1979; 1988; 1995; 2000), and more recently for a trilogy of books on reflexivity, presented as mediating between 'structure' and 'agency' (1979; 1988; 1995; 2000; 2003; 2007a; 2011). She is the only female President of the International Sociological Association to date and is a Council member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences.

By contrast, Dave Elder-Vass has spent much of his career outside academia, in a variety of technical and managerial roles. More recently, as a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Essex and now as a lecturer at Loughborough University, he has been developing an approach to structure, culture, and agency that is in many ways similar to Archer's – an approach that is expressed most fully in his book *The Causal Power of Social Structures* (2010a). In seeking to develop an account that is founded on a rigorous approach to causality he too has invoked the concept of emergence; and both Archer and Elder-Vass acknowledge strong connections with the early work of Roy Bhaskar (Bhaskar, 1975; Bhaskar, 1989 [1979]).

Alongside these similarities, however, there have been divergences. On the question of agency, Elder-Vass has sought to reconcile Archer's account of reflexivity with a version of Bourdieu's *habitus* theory (2007b); a reconciliation that Archer has strongly resisted (2010b). On the question of social structure, Elder-Vass has reaffirmed Archer's invocation of emergence but questioned whether all of the cases she cites necessarily entail it (2007a). Broadly speaking, one might say that these are two theorists seeking to develop a realist social theory that is both philosophically coherent and sociologically plausible – a realistic social realism – but disagreeing over some aspects of how to achieve this.

The present exchange carries these debates into new territory. It began as an exchange of emails over a draft paper, since published as (Elder-Vass, 2010b), in which Elder-Vass outlines an ontology of culture that differs significantly from that developed at length by Archer in her well-known book *Culture and Agency* (1988). Once again, there is agreement on the need for a realist ontology in relation to culture, but disagreement on how a realist perspective might translate into a more specific understanding of the origins, nature and influences of cultural factors that contribute to shaping the social world. Both authors see the reproduction and transformation of culture as occurring through morphogenetic cycles in which there is an iteration of what may be called subjective and objective moments. In each cycle subjects are influenced by existing culture, which is not of their making, and through their subsequent actions they help to reconstitute or elaborate the objective features of culture. For Archer, however, those objective features take the form of a "Cultural System" composed of ideas, whereas for Elder-Vass they take the form of "norm circles" composed primarily of people.

At stake here are the answers to a series of fundamental questions concerning the ontology of the social world. How should we understand the nature of culture? Can culture exist in the form of ideas that are autonomous of human individuals, whilst being activity dependent upon human subjects for their formation? What form could such an existence take? What role do the material carriers of culture play in its ontology and its reproduction? And if we doubt the existence of autonomous ideas, can we still justify the claim that culture is something real, something that is causally effective in its own right? These are questions that have exercised not only realists but also thinkers in a variety of other traditions. The exchange that follows, then, will be of interest to all those who find the nature of culture problematic.

Archer

When I first began to theorize culture (1985), there was no approach that could properly be called ‘cultural realism’. Equally, at that time it was canonical to view culture as ‘a community of shared meanings’. It seemed to me then and still does that this wrongly and unhelpfully elides the ‘meanings’ with their being ‘shared’. The roots of this conflation can be traced back to early anthropology and gained philosophical reinforcement when Wittgenstein’s ‘forms of life’ were imported into social theory. This approach holds culture to be both *shared* and *coherent*. It thus rules out one or both opposite states of cultural affairs: cultural divisions within a ‘community’ and cultural contradictions within a conspectus of ideas. Since the latter two are ubiquitous, this tradition that denied them seemed overdue for revision.

In the Morphogenetic Approach to Culture,[2] I attempted to develop a realist approach to culture based on the following three propositions, none of which meets with your agreement.

1. *Ideas are sui generis real*. Where propositions are concerned, these are human products that are either true or false. At any given time, the stock of knowledge contains both, although we are epistemically incapable of knowing which is which for many ideas. The full corpus of ideas, known or available to be known at any time, is termed the 'Cultural System' (C.S.). To refer to the C.S. is to say nothing about the consistency or contradiction of its components.

2. *The sharing of ideas is contingent.* So too, is whether or not a given idea has salience in the social order – or part of it – at any given time. This contingency depends upon who is promoting (upholding, diffusing, imposing etc.) particular ideas at any given time, how well they do it, and what opposition they encounter or stimulate. These are Socio-Cultural (S-C) matters. Culture cannot be confined to ideas that are currently endorsed by social groups (at any T1) because these are always a portion of the ideas available for endorsement. Usually, S-C conflict leads to the activation of some of that non-salient portion, specifically those ideas which challenge whatever is or bids to be hegemonic. Thus, unfashionable ideas can be revived, as appears to be the case for 'paganism' today, Yet, how can ideas be revived, re-discovered, retrieved or re-activated unless they are credited with ontological status?

3. *The interplay between 'ideas'* (C.S.) *and 'groups'* (S-C) *is dynamic and accounts for cultural elaboration.* An adequate theoretical approach to culture (like structure) requires both diachronic analysis (of how certain ideas came to be in social currency at any time, of which groups sponsored them and why they did and may still do so, and against what past or on-going opposition) as well as synchronic analysis of what maintains cultural morphostasis for as long as it lasts.

Although you accept this for structure and also allowed that the morphogenetic approach usefully contributes to it (Elder-Vass, 2007a), I feel that your cultural theory shows a bias towards 'presentism' in consistently focussing upon the synchronic alone. The implicit assumption is that synchronic accounts can somehow be conducted without serious reference to diachronic processes: who won out and who lost out badly in the previous S-C round and how that advantages some groups and disadvantages others (by privileging certain tracts of the C.S.) in the current round of cultural interaction. Thus, although I see considerable merits in your 'norm circle' approach, summarized in this discussion, these would be strengthened if the norm circles had a history and a biography that determined their 'starting positions' at the beginning of any analysis of a particular episode of cultural interaction.

As Realists we endorse a stratified social ontology, with different emergent properties and powers pertaining to different levels of cultural reality in this case. Therefore, the fact that I distinguish the Cultural System from Socio-Cultural interaction – which *empirically* are encountered conjointly though *ontologically* they constitute different strata – should not *in principle* be a bone of contention between us. Of course, it remains open to you to

maintain that, (a) this ontological distinction is not warranted, or (b) the distinction is not theoretically (or practically) useful. Your main objection seems to be (a). You are saying that ontologically it is not on because you reject my proposition (1) above, that ideas are real and separable from knowing subjects. You also endorse (b), but in direct consequence of subscribing to (a).

I justify the distinction as follows and it turns out to be familiarly quotidian. Culture as a whole is defined as referring to all intelligibilia, that is to any item having the dispositional ability to be understood by someone - whether or not anyone does so at a given time. Within this corpus, the C.S. is that sub-set of items to which the law of contradiction can be applied - i.e. society's propositional register at any given time. Contradictions and complementarities are *logical* properties of the world of ideas, of World Three as Popper (1979: 298f) termed it, or, if preferred, of the contents of the archive.

We use this concept everyday when we say that the ideas of X are consistent with those of Y, or that theory or belief A contradicts theory or belief B.[3] In so doing, we grant that a C.S. has an objective existence because of the autonomous logical relations amongst its component ideas (doctrines, theories, beliefs and individual propositions). These are independent of anyone's claim to know, to believe, to assert or to assent to them, because this is knowledge independent of a knowing subject - like any unread book.

However, the above is quite different from another kind of everyday statement, namely that the ideas of X were influenced by those of Y, where we refer to the influence of people on one another - such as teachers on

pupils, television on its audience, or earlier thinkers on later ones. These depend upon *causal relations,* that is, the degree of cultural uniformity produced by the imposition of ideas by one group of people on another through the whole gamut of familiar techniques – exhortation, argument, persuasion, manipulation and mystification – which often entail the use of power.

At any moment, the contents of the C.S. are the product of historical S-C interaction, but having emerged (cultural elaboration being a continuous process) then *qua* product, the C.S. has properties and powers of its own kind. As with structure, some of its most important causal powers are those of constraints and enablements. In the cultural domain these stem from contradictions and complementarities. However, again like structure, constraints require something to constrain and enablements something to enable. Those 'somethings' are the ideational projects of people – the beliefs they seek to uphold, the theories they wish to vindicate, the propositions they want to be able to deem valid, and the counter ideas or ideologies they seek to promote.[4]

In other words, the exercise of C.S. causal powers is dependent upon their activation from the S-C level. What ideas are entertained Socio-Culturally at any given time result from the properties and powers belonging to that level. It is interaction at the S-C level that explains why particular groups wish to uphold a particular idea – or to undermine one held by another group. However, once they do, then their ideational projects will confront C.S. properties (not of their own making) and unleash these systemic powers upon themselves, which different groups may seek to realise or to contain.

The Socio-Cultural level possesses causal powers of its own kind in relation to the C.S.; it can resolve apparent contradictions and respond adaptively to real ones, or explore and exploit the complementarities it confronts, thus modifying the Cultural System in the process. Socio-Cultural relations can set their own cultural agenda, often prompted by a group's structurally based interests, through creatively adding new items to the systemic register. In these ways, the S-C level is responsible for elaborating upon the composition of the C.S. level morphogenetically. Relationships between the two levels are summarised below.

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Figure 1 to be placed approximately here

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Even when Socio-Cultural integration is found to be high, this says *nothing* whatsoever about whether the corpus of ideas endorsed are *logically consistent* (i.e. that idea X is compatible with idea Y). They may well not be, in which case the contradiction remains (at the level of the Cultural System) as a permanent fault line that can be split open if and when (some of) the population in question develops articulated interests in and an organization for doing so. Equally, the components of the C.S. making up its corpus of ideas may have high logical consistency and yet Socio-Cultural dissensus and actual antagonism may be profound. As Gouldner (1971: 241f) pointed out, no normative corpus is proof against groups with divergent interests differentially accentuating particular elements and according them particularistic

interpretations to promote the concerns of a group against others. In other words, Socio-Cultural and Cultural System integration can vary independently from one another: 'sharedness' is variable rather than definitional.

The Morphogenetic approach to culture: its relative stability versus its transformation; the substantive form taken by the development of any corpus of beliefs, theories or propositions; and whether or not such ideational changes can be made to stick Socio-Culturally – all of these depend upon sustaining and utilizing the distinction between the C.S. and the S-C levels and on not conflating them.[5] Both Kuhn's 'normalization' of scientific paradigms and Bourdieu's 'naturalization' of 'cultural arbitraries' should be seen as *attempts at ideational unification* but ones whose success is never a foregone conclusion.

By maintaining the distinction, it becomes possible to theorise about *variations* in cultural integration and their relationship to *variations* in social integration. In other words, the interplay *between* culture and agency can be examined in the same way as between structure and agency. When the two levels are allowed to vary independently of one another their different combinations can be hypothesised to generate cultural reproduction or transformation. Without this, we have no theory about when one or the other will *ceteris paribus* result. I think that this is the consequence of your flattened ontology in which different 'norm circles' intersect and sometimes conflict but on an implicitly level playing field. In each instance, the outcome is a purely empirical one.

In turn, the relations between the C.S. and the S-C form the three phases of an analytical cycle made up of (see Fig. 1):

<Cultural Conditioning ⇒ Socio-Cultural Interaction ⇒ Cultural Elaboration'>

In fact, the final phase may culminate at T4 in either morphogenesis (transformation) or morphostasis (reproduction). In both cases, T4 constitutes the new T1', the conditional influences affecting subsequent interaction. This explanatory framework, employing analytical dualism when undertaking practical cultural investigations, depends upon two simple propositions: that cultural structure necessarily pre-dates the actions which transform it; and that cultural elaboration necessarily post-dates those actions (Fig. 2).

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Figure 2 to be placed approximately here

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It follows that I have three disagreements with you: (i) over your ontological dismissal of the objective Cultural System; (ii) about your definition of culture(s) – 'culture is a *shared* set of practices and understandings' (2010b p. 4), and (iii) concerning what you sacrifice by not being able to differentiate between the C.S. and the S-C levels in terms of accounting for cultural stability or change.

Elder-Vass[6]

The concept of culture, as I understand it, refers primarily to our institutionalised practices: ways of living (though not usually all-encompassing or uncontested 'forms of life') that are shared by groups of people, and enacted by

individuals *because* they are so shared. For critical realists, however, such definitions are at best a preliminary to understanding what something is and how it works. In the spirit of Bhaskar's early work, we must ask what sort of *things* exerting what sorts of *causal powers* are responsible for the phenomena we are investigating (Bhaskar, 1975; Elder-Vass, 2005). Your books *Culture and Agency* (Archer, 1988) and *Realist Social Theory* (Archer, 1995) make an important beginning by framing culture as a *morphogenetic cycle* including both subjective and objective moments. In the first phase of this cycle, the agent is conditioned by the prevailing objective culture; in the second, the agent acts, or rather *interacts* with others; and in the third the actions of the agent contribute to the reproduction and/or elaboration of the culture, thus providing the input to phase one of subsequent cycles. In the objective moment of the cycle, individuals are influenced by the existing cultural context, the *cultural system*; in the subjective moment, as knowing subjects they choose to act, producing *socio-cultural interaction* that is influenced by the cultural system, but which in turn reproduces or transforms that system, providing as it does input into the future understandings of the cultural system by other individuals (Archer, 1995: 179-183, 193).

The subjective moment of this cycle is primarily a matter of human agency, and depends upon the possibility that our beliefs (or sometimes our subconscious dispositions), having been influenced externally in the objective moment, can then have an impact on our subsequent enactment of practices.[7] In ontological terms, the entity with causal power here is the person, a human individual who has the causal power to act, under the influence of their own mental properties – those dispositions or beliefs that comprise culture in its subjective form.

The difficulties in explaining the ontology of culture arise primarily when we turn to the objective moment of the cycle. To be specific, the problem is this: what form can culture take that is external to individuals and also able to influence their beliefs? Durkheim, for example, offers *collective representations* or *collective consciousness* as the answer to this question, but it has never been clear where such representations or consciousness could exist, if not in the minds of individuals (see Elder-Vass, 2010b). In your work you offer a different answer, by invoking a version of Karl Popper's concept of objective 'World 3' knowledge.

The cultural system, you argue, "is constituted by the corpus of existing intelligibilia – by all things capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone" (Archer, 1988: 104). These 'intelligibilia' are concrete material things – books, films, documents, musical scores, and the like – from which we can extract cultural meaning. But the Cultural System itself consists, not of the material objects themselves (which exist in Popper's World 1 of material objects), but rather of the *ideas* that are expressed in them. Hence its components may be logically related to each other, in particular through relations of consistency or contradiction (Archer, 1988: 105; Popper, 1979: 298-9). The components of World 3 are distinct from what Popper calls "knowledge in the subjective sense, which consists of dispositions and expectations" of individual human beings, and which constitutes the contents of his World 2 (Popper, 1979: 66). World 3, by contrast, contains "knowledge without a knowing subject" (Popper, 1979: 109), "knowledge in the objective sense, which consists of the logical content of our theories, conjectures, guesses" (Popper, 1979: 73).

In the account you draw from Popper, then, the objective moment of culture is embedded not in a collective consciousness but in the ideational contents of a

collective archive. This has the advantage that the physical material of the archive clearly exists externally to human beings and so its contents are in a synchronic sense autonomous of them and capable of acting back upon them. But this physical material itself is still only part of Popper's World 1; what the argument requires is that *World 3* is autonomous of human beings and capable of acting back upon them. This is much more problematic. As Bloor argued in his early review of Popper's theory it is far from clear what "mode of being" the ideational content of the archive could have (Bloor, 1974: 75).

To put it differently, if World 3 knowledge exists and can influence us, it must exist in some concrete form beyond World 1 artefacts, and Popper fails to identify any such form. We can be reasonably confident that knowledge or ideas can exist as mental properties and that as such they can participate in logical relations. But outside the brain, I would argue, there is no way for ideas to be thought or to participate in logical relations. Popper is in danger of adopting the idealist view that ideas 'as such' can be autonomous of people, can influence action, and can enter into relations, independently of being mental properties.

Popper's identification of World 3 knowledge with the logical contents of the *physical* archive is perhaps intended to avoid such charges, but this argument can only succeed if books and other intelligibilia contain ideas as such. But as a material resource the archive contains only marks on paper (or some other medium). Such marks do have what you call a "dispositional ability to be understood" (above) but I am concerned about the move from this to the claim that they contain ideas. Books and the like, in conjunction with linguistic systems, can certainly be used to communicate ideas, but it seems to me that what they contain is only a potential to be understood by a skilled reader, and not ideas as such. They contain, I would say,

physical *representations* of ideas. It is only in the reader's head that these are translated into ideas as such, as a result of a causal process in which the potential of the book interacts with the capabilities of the reader. Within books, then, there is no actual knowledge or culture, only marks that may be used to communicate them; and when that communication is completed successfully, what is produced is subjective (World 2) and not objective (World 3) knowledge or culture.

If this is so, then the objective moment of the morphogenetic cycle of culture must take some other form than Popper's objective knowledge. Instead, I suggest, the objective moment is produced by a collective social entity, a group of human beings. To be more specific, it is a causal effect of the social groups that I have called *norm circles* (Elder-Vass, 2008; Elder-Vass, 2010a).[8] A norm circle is the group of people that is committed to endorsing and enforcing a particular norm.

To return to the ontological question with which I started, then, my argument is that *norm circles* are the entities at work in the objective moment of the morphogenetic cycle of culture. In this moment a norm circle can exercise an emergent causal power to increase the tendency of individuals to conform to the norm that it endorses. In the simplest version of the norm circle model, the parts of this entity are the individual human agents who are committed to endorsing and enforcing the norm in their personal relationships with others. But this is more than just a personal commitment: members of a norm circle are aware that other members of the circle share their commitment, they feel an obligation to them to endorse and enforce the norm concerned, and they have an expectation of others that they will support them in that endorsement and enforcement. In other words, the members of a norm circle share a *collective intention* to support the norm, and as a result they each tend to support it more actively than they would if they did not share that collective

intention.[9] Hence, although these social pressures are exercised by individuals, in acting to endorse and enforce a particular norm, an individual acts as the *representative* of the norm circle for that norm.

The consequence is that those individuals who experience the endorsing and enforcing behaviour of the members of a norm circle come to recognise that they face a normative environment in which failure to observe the norm concerned will tend to prompt negative sanctions, whereas observing the norm will tend to elicit a positive response.[10] This understanding of the normative environment in turn leads the individuals concerned to tend to internalise a tendency to conform to the norm concerned. Norm circles, then, produce a tendency amongst individuals to conform to the norms that they espouse; and it is this tendency that is the causal power responsible for normative social institutions. Culture, I suggest, is indistinguishable from such institutions. Whether we are talking about styles of music, food, or painting, about how we use language to communicate, or about the ways in which we regulate our social relations with each other, to list just a few examples, all of these are norm-governed elements of culture.

From this perspective, then, it is a mistake to believe that the ideas that form the content of our culture exist *as ideas* in some objective form externally to individual human belief. Ideas as such exist only as the mental properties of individuals, and it is not some external objective existence but rather their *endorsement by a collective* that makes them culture. Only individuals have the power to hold beliefs; but only groups have the power to designate those beliefs as elements of shared culture. Culture is not simply belief, but socially endorsed belief, and that social endorsement can only be brought about by the group.

Archer

You are arguing that ‘books’ – standing for the multi-media archive – do not contains *ideas* but only *representations* of them, that is a potential for being understood by a skilled reader, which puts them inside our heads. Frankly, I don’t follow your distinction between *ideas* and *representations.* It is not what William James (1890: 254) meant when he discussed the difference between our mental ‘premonitionary tendency’ and the words we *then* select to express a thought. Nor is it similar to Charles Taylor’s (1985: 64) argument that by repeated ‘articulations’ we refine our own ideas. In both of these cases we have ideas in our heads, but they remain locked there – inaccessible to others and influencing no-one but their originator – unless they are *represented* vocally or on paper. It follows that *representations* are our only public access to ideas as we cannot get inside the heads of their progenitors. And there is no other *entrée* to any idea, given it is first-person in kind (Archer, 2007b).

Moreover, I have a further doubt, namely that it is necessary that an idea has to be in someone’s head for it to have legitimate ontological status. Sometimes in everyday life an idea migrates from head to paper and back again. Suppose I make a shopping list, then it is misplaced, and I do the shop without it. I will forget some items that I do need. In that case, my full shopping needs were not in my head but on the list. Similarly, many of us keep the instructions to domestic appliances, accepting that these are more accurate guides to making them work properly than the rather vague ideas retained in our heads, which we do not trust as being correct. Then again, if uncertain

about our mental recall, we re-read Durkheim's *Rules,* and I would say we are consulting his ideas. Certainly, you and I are agreed that we are not consulting Durkheim himself, are not capable of gaining access to his mind by occult means, and neither do we take our colleagues' views on Durkheim as being authoritative. Yet, you doubt that *Rules* can 'contain ideas as such' because the book is only 'marks on paper'. However, when we 'look something up', we are no longer a 'knowing subject' but a subject knowingly in search of knowledge. Thus, I stand by my claim that a book has 'the dispositional capacity to be understood' means the same as 'it contains ideas'.

It follows that I think it mistaken to construe books simply as World I physical artefacts. As Bhaskar maintains, 'books are social forms' (1989 [1979]: 40) and thus have the same ontological status as 'structures', 'organizations', 'roles' etc. In order to avoid reification he insists that 'the causal power of social forms is mediated through social agency' (1989 [1979]: 26). Thus, a book not only requires a mind to create it but also another mind(s) to understand it. Mediation is always required (Archer, 2003; Archer, 2010a), otherwise both structural and cultural properties are held to operate mysteriously but as hydraulic forces. It also follows that unread books, whilst retaining their dispositional ability to be understood, can exert no causal powers on anyone. This is another reason why 'properties' and causal 'powers' should not be run together; many properties exist unexercised. Thus, I think you are wrongly eliding 'properties' and 'powers' when maintaining that what books and the like 'contain is only a potential to be understood by a skilled reader, and not ideas as such'.

Your fundamental objection is that ‘the archive contains not knowledge as such but only potential knowledge: that as a material resource it contains only marks on paper (or some other medium) and that there is no informational content to such marks in the absence of a reader or other interpreter’ (Elder-Vass, 2010b: 356). This denial of ‘informational content’ to our diachronically established archive and its reductive dependency for meaning upon ‘knowing subjects’ can, I think, be shown to unravel.

Firstly, I have insisted that the items lodged in the ‘library’ must have the ‘dispositional capacity to be understood’. This is what makes them intelligibilia rather than mere markings, such as those made by the legendary monkeys-at-the-keyboard or, in the case of stones, by natural geo-physical processes. How, at first, do we know that the marks are intelligible? We don’t. But, initially, neither do we know that an unknown language is indeed a language rather than randomly produced sounds. Lack of human recognition at a given time is no guide to intelligibility. What then distinguishes between intelligible and random markings? Ultimately, it is their decipherability. Certainly the jury may not be convened for centuries (as with the Rosetta Stone whilst it was hidden under the sands), its members may disagree for a time (as with the Dead Sea Scrolls), and they may fail as decoders (which is why museum exhibits are often re-labelled). In addition, although there is certainly a need for ‘mediation’, there is no *a priori* reason why the intelligible content requires a ‘mind’ to understand it – this task could be done by a computer and then put to use by mediating agents.

You do concede that what the archive contains is ‘a potential to be understood’ but in my view, the ‘potential’ of a book – that is, the ideas it

contains – may or may not be recognized or realized, but that potential is real. Ontologically, that property cannot depend upon 'the capabilities of the reader'. If ideas are made to depend upon our human abilities to understand them, this entails a form of the epistemic fallacy: *what is* becomes reduced to what 'we' can grasp, at any given time. Not to be understood at first has been the fate of many scientific theories and novel artistic forms. Undoubtedly, for any 'intelligible' to become causally efficacious, someone does have to grasp it, but what they are grasping is something real. These are ideas, culturally deposited by previous thinkers, which cannot be reduced to their subjective apprehension and appropriation and thus transferred to World 2.

As Popper himself pointed out, since all of the implications of a single hypothesis cannot be comprehended, so knowledge cannot be restricted to the known or to the knower at any point in time. Hence, it cannot be the case that 'cultural content only exists in people's heads'. By recording ideas we pass their 'potential' along the time-line, and they retain their dispositional ability to be understood, activated, used and abused.

Thus, in my view, it is quite legitimate to conceive of contradictions or complementarities *existing* between two intelligibles, independently of anyone knowing or caring. Idea X *is* incompatible with idea Y, whether or not any of us yet understand this – just as the contents of the next two books we read may turn out to be. To maintain otherwise is again to commit the epistemic fallacy by making their ability to be understood depend upon our current understanding, which is both anthropocentric and relativistic.

Why is this important? I have fully agreed that someone/some group needs to 'activate' an idea before it becomes socially salient and influential.

The point is that in so doing the group also becomes embroiled in that idea's *logical* connections with others. Durkheim (1977) gave a splendid example of how early Christian thinking was dogged by its inescapable connections with incompatible Greek eudaemonistic thought. Because Scripture was written in Greek it entailed further forays into pagan classical philosophy in order for its concepts to be understood.

In other words, the ideas endorsed by a group have to be upheld within an ideational environment established prior to them; one that may be 'hostile' (expose the holders to logical contradictions) or 'friendly' (introducing them to unsuspected compatibilities) – as Weber described respectively for ancient Judaism compared with Confucianism and Hinduism. In turn, this environment profoundly affects how the ideas held by a group develop: through corrective 'syncretism' when confronted by 'constraining contradictions' (as with Christianity) versus elaborative 'systematization' where 'concomitant complementarities' (Archer, 1988: 227-273) are encountered (as with Hinduism). These divergent ideational developments remain inexplicable without reference to the logical properties of the field of ideas into which a group has plunged itself by embracing a particular belief, theory or set of propositions. The morphogenetic approach to culture was advanced precisely to give a handle to this.

Elder-Vass

Perhaps the central question on which we disagree is the nature and implications of the "dispositional capacity to be understood", or the "potential to be understood by a skilled reader" that we would both attribute to intelligibilia. As you say, if a book has

such a potential then the potential is real independently of whether it is recognized or realized; its realisation depends upon the capabilities of the reader but the potential does not. On my understanding, we may call this potential a property of the book, or a power, and this argument applies equally to properties or powers.

The potential to be understood, then, is a causal power of a book, which may or may not be realized depending upon whether or not the book is actually read by a skilled reader. But we still need to be more careful, I think, about what we mean by "understood" in this sentence. In one usage (typified by the phrase "on my understanding" as used above), to understand something is to impose a meaning on it, or to extract a meaning from it. In another, to understand something is to extract *the right meaning* from it. For many of our day to day communications, this distinction is unproblematic. If I say "my car is blue" then no-one with any significant grasp of English will have difficulty in extracting the right meaning from this. Technically, all such attributions of meaning are fallible, but much of our communication is clear and unambiguous enough that we can rely on obtaining practically adequate understandings of it. If this were not so, we could not even begin to conduct a debate like this one.

Still, a great deal of culture – and for academics often the most interesting part of it – is far from unambiguous. Many of our books can be understood in more than one way, and it is not even *conceptually* clear what the right way would be. One reading of the right way to understand something is to understand it as the author intended it to be understood. But what of the Freudian slip? If I say one thing while meaning another, perhaps the right way to understand what I say is to understand the words

that are actually said, as they would generally be understood by members of our presumptively shared linguistic culture, rather than what I intend. More significantly for scholars, perhaps, we must consider the questions raised by hermeneutics. When the author is from a different culture than our own, we may bring different connotations to the words in use and thus come to a different understanding than that intended. At some level of precision, it may be impossible for us to arrive at an accurate understanding of what the author intended since the nuances of her use of language may be lost to history. Many texts may also have contemporary significance that depends upon interpreting them from within the linguistic or other cultural assumptions of some period other than that in which they were written. Religious texts such as the Bible and the Qur'an are perhaps the most obvious cases. The implication is that even if we confine our sense of 'understanding' to the concept of understanding that depends on attributing the *right* meaning, a book may have the potential to be understood in a number of different ways.

But we also need to consider the looser sense of understanding. To forestall some possible objections and confusions let me use a different term here: we may say that a book has the potential to stimulate a *sense* of its meaning in a reader, where the term *sense* is used to indicate that no judgement is implicit in whether this sense is a right understanding or not. In the process of reading, a causal interaction occurs between book and reader, in which the reader interprets the text in the light of their linguistic and cultural dispositions or beliefs. The outcome is to generate a sense of meaning in the reader. The book, it seems to me, has the potential to stimulate many different senses of meaning in different readers. To return to Durkheim's *Rules* for example, it is abundantly clear that this book generates a wide variety of senses of meaning,

particularly if we include undergraduate students in our population of readers. If we are treating the ideational potential of a book in purely causal terms, then we cannot restrict it simply to the potential to stimulate the right meaning, or the author's intended meaning if that is the variety of right meaning that is implicit in the concept of a cultural system.

This is not to say, of course, that we cannot make rational judgments or rational arguments about which of these senses is the most valuable or accurate way of representing the meaning of a text. Many possible readings of a text are simply wrong because they are based on failures to understand the language used; and others are highly implausible because they are not coherent with other parts of the same text or with other texts that we have good reason to think of as closely related. But such judgements always rest on a social process: the social process by which we acquire our language, for example, or those in which we discuss meanings of texts with teachers or colleagues. This in itself, of course, is not in conflict with your argument: these are varieties of socio-cultural interaction that, in your terms, contribute to the elaboration of a cultural system (or, I might say, something that is in some senses functionally equivalent to a cultural system).

In strictly causal terms, then, we could argue that a book (or other intelligible) has the causal power to stimulate a range of possible senses of its meaning, that the realisation of such meaning always occurs in a process of interaction between the book and the linguistic/cultural preconceptions of the reader, and that given the book and the cultural context some of the possible meanings are more likely to be realised than others. In interpretive terms, the realised meaning, or the most likely meaning to be

realised, may or may not be accurate representations of the author's intended meaning.

What can it mean, then, to say that a book's potential is that it contains "ideas-yet-to-be-understood"? In the strictly causal account offered above, there is a coherent *but metaphorical* way of making sense of this: that physical books (in Popper's World 1), in interaction with readers, produce ideas in those readers' heads, (ideas, that is, in Popper's World 2). Within the book itself, however, those actual ideas do not exist; the book merely possesses a range of potentials, a range of different ways in which it might be read. At best we may say that its text produces a *tendency* for it to be understood in some ways rather than others. But it is only in our heads that each book assumes a determinate set of meanings. It would therefore be, I think, a mistake to conclude that intelligibilia contain a strictly determinate set of ideas that constitutes a cultural system independently of human interpretations of it: there is no World 3.

Despite these sceptical reservations, we must recognise that contemporary societies have developed a set of linguistic/communicative practices that are extremely effective in ensuring that intelligibilia often can be understood: understood in the strong sense that their consumers often obtain a practically adequate understanding of the author's intended meaning. As a result, books and other intelligibilia are enormously important resources in these societies, and I admit that I have neglected their cultural significance in most of my work to date, which has focussed more on the cultural consequences of spoken and physical interactions between people. Your comments here have stimulated me to think a little more about the role of intelligibilia, or what we might call the archive of cultural products.

In my account of culture we do face an “ideational environment” of sorts, but one that consists not of ideas but of a set of norm circles, and the awareness they create of ideas that those around us share and endorse (or reject). So far I have tended to think of these norm circles as composed of people, but our discussion has prompted the thought that these norm circles may be hybrid entities, complexes of *both* people and intelligibilia; that the combination of these two produces a tendency for individuals to live according to particular cultural standards (i.e. socio-cultural interaction). The ideas that people extract from their interactions with intelligibilia may influence them, just as those that are communicated to them verbally may do. Again the Bible and the Qur’an are striking examples.

Norm circles in pre-literate societies could perhaps operate without intelligibilia (and if so the implication is that we can have culture without intelligibilia) but with the advent of writing we start to acquire documents that take on an important role in shaping and stabilising cultures. Intelligibilia, as you say, provide a means for passing cultural influences “along the timeline”, by virtue of being (fallibly) understandable in the strong sense. The ideational environment, on this view, is a complex of norm circles, each of which is a contextually variable mix of people and intelligibilia, which combine to create a sense in each of us of our culture, a sense that influences our action. While I’m unconvinced by the argument that they contain ideas as such, then, my understanding of intelligibilia allows that people may decipher potential ideas from them and subsequently make use of them. In many respects this operates ‘as if’ there were actually a stock of ideas in the archive.

But what's missing so far from this kind of model of cultural systems is that the material we tend to draw on from the vast array available in the archive is almost always material that has preferential credibility because we understand it to be endorsed in some way by some group – what I will call an epistemic norm circle (see Elder-Vass, 2009). In education, for example, students are guided by an epistemic norm circle composed mainly of teachers and curriculum designers to think of some written sources as worthwhile, or as more reliable than others, and hence the claims represented in them are attributed the status of knowledge. For claims to be socially endorsed in this way, it is not necessary for them to exist in World 3. All that is necessary is that we can communicate them in practically adequate fashion using World 1 intelligibilia and linguistic systems as a bridge between the islands of individual World 2 consciousness.

This preferential endorsement of some ideas and sources over others is a fundamental element of the ideational environment that each of us faces. If we were to compare the cultural systems, for example, of the UK and the USA in the area of their understandings of the origins of humanity, then we would find that essentially the same set of intelligibilia is available in both (at least if we define intelligibilia in terms of their ideational 'content' – there is no doubt a radical difference in the *quantities* of certain books between the two). But in the USA creationism is taken extremely seriously whereas in the UK it is generally considered to be not only false but also based on a misguided conception of scientific knowledge. Now, as I'm sure you'd insist, this difference requires a morphogenetic explanation, but there is also a synchronic difference between these two cultural systems, and I don't see how the concept of the cultural system as a stock of ideas can make sense of this difference.

What is needed here is a recognition that not all ideas within a cultural system are equal, and I suggest that this is explained by the differences in their tendency to be normatively endorsed. In this case there are radical differences in the degree of *endorsement* of creationist and evolutionist texts in the two countries. While these different patterns of endorsement may be reflected within, for example, the writings of educationalists, and thus available in the archive, it is not their recognition in the archive that makes the difference; it is the commitment that actual teachers have to endorse them in their interactions with students. And this commitment is distinct from those actual socio-cultural interactions themselves; it is a normative commitment that is itself the product of a wider social group, and that affects those socio-cultural interactions.

Still, you might reply, this is all a matter of socio-cultural interaction, and I am ignoring one of the central characteristics of the cultural system as you understand it: the claim that the cultural system has "autonomous logical relations amongst its components" (above). In particular, you argue that ideas may stand in relations of consistency or contradiction with each other, independently of what goes on in socio-cultural interaction, and that such logical relations between ideas have a social impact. Evolutionism and creationism, for example, seem to be downright contradictory of each other. You want to distinguish between the social significance of socio-cultural conflict or consensus on the one hand, and ideational contradiction or consistency on the other. One might say, for example, that the consensus over evolutionism has been disrupted in the US because of the logical contradiction between these two perspectives that remained despite an earlier socially-imposed consensus. Creationism

as an active creed could even have died out entirely but been revived on the basis of readings of Genesis.

Logical relations, I would say in response, exist in our heads. We share similar understandings of logical relations because we share similar cognitive capacities and we are taught to use them – to reason – in similar ways. Logical relations are themselves ideas, ideas about the relations between other ideas. Some such ideas may refer to actual relations that hold autonomously of us. For example, if it is true, as I take it that it is, that it is impossible for two different non-nested material objects to fully occupy the same volume of space at the same time, then the suggestion that material object *A* can be in location *x* at the same time as the different non-nested material object *B* is a logical contradiction that refers to a fact that is autonomous of our beliefs about it. The logical relation itself, however, still only exists in our heads. Furthermore, the truth of real impossibilities does not in itself entail that a corresponding contradiction will be represented or even implicit in intelligibilia, or vice versa.

I argue, then, that outside our brains or minds there is no way for ideas to participate in logical relations. Relations such as contradiction cannot *exist* within the intelligibilia (between their contents), though they can of course be represented in them, just as any other idea can. This, however, need not deprive them of socio-historical significance. To see why this is so let us consider the process of cultural morphogenesis documented in your T1-T4 model above. As I understand it, in the first phase of this cycle, the cultural conditioning phase, individual actors are influenced by the cultural system, that is by the ideational contents of intelligibilia.

This then affects their socio-cultural interactions in the second phase, but they learn from these interactions and reflect upon them, leading to the third phase in which cultural elaboration occurs through their production of new intelligibilia. This phase may result in cultural reproduction, if the new intelligibilia add nothing to the ideational content of the old ones, or cultural transformation, if they add new content.

Now, I suggest, there is no need for World 3 in this model. Cultural conditioning can still occur through interaction with intelligibilia even if intelligibilia contain only *representations* of ideas, even if those representations can only be apprehended fallibly, and even if there is no definite truth of the right way to apprehend them. And cultural elaboration can still occur in these same circumstances. What is being elaborated, however, is not a determinate autonomous cultural system composed of ideas, but a stock of intelligibilia with a contingent and variable impact on our understandings. The morphogenetic approach can dispense with World 3. This does not deprive it of the ability to recognise the detection of contradiction as an element in the causal process, but it does enable us to become more flexible about the way individuals come to terms with the archive. In particular, it enables us to recognise that the influence on us of intelligibilia is not a direct and unmediated transmission of belief, but rather a process in which our reading of the source is influenced by our previous socio-cultural interactions (as when, for example, we are reading something recommended by a teacher and therefore are disposed to believe it) and modified by our subsequent interactions (as when, for example, we discuss what we have read in class and realise that others interpret it differently).

Archer

It seems to me that one reason we cannot reach agreement on the Cultural System hinges on other debates, particularly about the ontological status of logic, that we do not have the space to discuss here. Hence, I will simply signal what I see as being the crux of that issue. This concerns your view that people's similar understandings – presumably local ones for you – of 'logical relations' depends on our similar cognitive capacities but also on the fact that 'we are taught to use them – to reason – in similar ways' (above). On the contrary, I maintain (Archer, 2000: 145-152) that logic – the principles of identity and non-contradiction – are acquired in natural practice and are predicates of both being able to think at all and thus also of verbal communication. The understanding of logical relations is therefore prior to any teaching act and primitive to the expression of logic as ideas. Consequently, logical *relations* are not themselves ideas, only *formulations of logic* are such.

I would like now to move over and discuss the Socio-Cultural level, where our debate continues. You hold that the objective aspects of culture are exclusively the property of a social group, specifically a 'norm circle', which 'is an entity with the emergent causal power to increase the dispositions of individuals to conform to the norm endorsed and enforced by the norm circle concerned' (Elder-Vass, 2010b: 359). I have no quarrel with this at all because it is exactly what I hold that social groups try to do through Socio-Cultural interaction, in which they indeed exercise causal powers of their own kind, thus (potentially) increasing normative conformity (Archer, 1988: 185-226). However, actions that attempt to produce cultural unification through, for example, censorship, containment strategies, or ideological manipulation,

pertain to the S-C level alone. In addition, the emergent causal powers of intelligibilia are needed to explain *why* any group would try to restrict access to the archive in the above ways. In so doing, these actors themselves acknowledge the objective (C.S.) capacity of ideas contrary to their own to threaten what they hold ideationally – hence the largely symbolic act of publicly burning books.

Given the ubiquity of social conflict over ideas, we also have a disagreement about the S-C level. For you, 'the most fundamental feature of cultures' is that 'culture is a *shared* set of practices and understandings' (Elder-Vass, 2010b: 352). To me, such *sharing* is always an *aim* on the part of a particular group *and never a definition,*[11] much less a state of affairs 'that tends to produce and sustain shared ways of living' (Elder-Vass, 2010b: 362). In order to discuss *sharedness* I need to introduce an example of a 'norm circle' and will use the Roman Catholic Church because the existence of its Magisterium (which includes the Catechism and Social Doctrine) shows that it clearly *intends* its norms to be shared by all members of the 'one holy, catholic and apostolic church'.

However, in terms of your two criteria of normative *sharedness*, namely, common 'practices' and common 'understandings', neither are met. 'Practices' as diverse as the sexual norms advocated in the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* and the liturgical norms endorsed by the Second Vatican Council are, in the first case, widely ignored, and in the second case, hotly contested (by those seeking to re-universalize the Roman Rite).[12] Certainly, many Catholics do share other beliefs (although most of these have been contentious at one time or another), so how much has to be shared? Equally,

they draw upon different strands from the long history of catholic thinking, ones which are not fully ideationally compatible, so how consensual does a norm group have to be?

'Understandings' are equally problematic, here I agree with you. Every Sunday it is the duty of the faithful to say the Creed, but were it broken down into its component propositions, the most diverse array of understood meanings would result. Rather differently, since the Church's Social Doctrine is frequently called its 'best kept secret', what 'proportion' of group norms has to be socio-culturally shared for a group to constitute a 'norm group'? Your response to this problem is to argue that it is not the case that 'the group as such can only endorse beliefs if the group as such 'knows' them'. Instead, 'All that is necessary is (i) that the members of a group are able to recognise whether *any given action conforms* to their understanding of the norm; and (ii) that their *understandings of the norm* are reasonably closely consistent with each other' (Elder-Vass, 2010b: 360, my italics). Yet, my above examples of 'practices' (actions) show condition (i) not to be met (Catholics practising contraception know they are flouting the norm) and the examples of 'understandings' show that condition (ii) is not met either (when norms are overtly contested or many members have no knowledge of them, the norms, as understood, cannot be 'closely consistent').

What are we to make of the Catholic Church (the Anglican is even more problematic) since it does seem to be a 'norm circle' in the general meaning of the term? Here, I think you are caught on the horns of a dilemma. Either you can respond that the Catholic Church is not what it seems to be *because* it lacks the *sharedness* of practices and understandings, definitive of

a norm group. However, if the sharing has to be reasonably high and consensual for a group to count as a norm group, then you will end up endorsing the Myth of Cultural Integration (1985), which you rightly want to avoid. The alternative response could be for you to maintain that the Catholic Church is a case where there are 'many and conflicting norm circles in any given social space' rather than a 'heavy clustering of norm circles around a broad cultural consensus' (Elder-Vass, 2010b: 357). If so, the fact that most of the sub-groups mentioned above remain in the Church raises the question of what holds them together, despite their ideational differences (often drawn from distinct parts of the C.S. and pulling in contrary directions)? It will hardly do to say that they *must* have sufficient in common *because* 'the group' does not fall apart.

Furthermore, the requirement of a 'reasonably closely consistent' set of understandings' poses another problem, one encountered in discussions of Wittgenstein's notion of a 'form of life'. If the demand for cultural consensus is stringent, then 'the group' meeting it becomes diminishingly small (Trigg, 1973: 70-1), perhaps reducing to two people. Yet the normative dyad hardly qualifies as an 'epistemic community' or constitutes a useful building block for sociology. Yet, if the demand is not fairly stringent, in what sense can we fairly talk about a collectivity being *a* norm group, rather than *several,* as delineated by their differences?

Nevertheless, the two of us are equally concerned to uphold the existence of ideational groups, that is, to resist ideal interests and groupings being presented as epiphenomena of material interests and groupings. However, at the Socio-Cultural level, it is important that all who manifestly

adhere to some theory or cluster of beliefs are not automatically assumed to be ‘true believers’. To slide from observing an overt ‘sharing’ of ideas into the assumption that this represents a genuine ‘community’ is always a mistake. In the attempt to mobilize support for a cause, some will be culturally bamboozled and others will be calculative in deploying ideas to resist or undermine those of their opponents. Still others will become disillusioned and be preparing a bid for normative breakaway. To do so, their leaders will scrutinize the supposed conspectus for loose ends and contradictory threads.

They will also do as we do when stuck over an idea – go and raid the library for some new material. The archive that is the Cultural System is also their reclamation yard from which inert ideas can be given new social salience, be re-tooled into sources of critique, of self-legitimation, or of counter-ideologies. Since their S-C opponents do not usually feel secure enough to remain speechless, they will do likewise. From their subsequent clash the elaboration of ideas develops. Thus, it is rarely adequate for explaining the outcome of S-C conflict (or quiescence) to remain at the level of group hostility or hegemony; cultural dynamics also involved the C.S. and how agents actively mediate the ideational resources deposited there.

Elder-Vass

Although we clearly disagree on the nature of the cultural system, I am not convinced that there are substantial underlying disagreements between us on the nature of socio-cultural interaction. Certainly the account you offer of the Roman Catholic church above is much more complex than the simple picture of a single norm circle. But here

I have offered only a brief and very abstract discussion of norm circles. There is much more to be said about them, and in saying that elsewhere I have elaborated the application of the concept in ways that converge with your comments above (Elder-Vass, 2010a: chapters 6-8). Let me just make two brief points on norm circles here. First, in describing norm circles I am seeking to identify the mechanism behind normativity and for that purpose I abstract from a vast range of complexities that must subsequently be reintroduced into the analysis. Second, actual social institutions or organisations do not map neatly onto norm circles; they are far more complex normative structures, and indeed they do more than enforce normative standards. These two points may be brought together by theorising actual organisations, from the normative perspective, as complexes of partly clustered and partly diverse (non-congruent) norm circles. Hence, for example, the Roman Catholic Church may 'officially' endorse a single set of norms but in practice different (and sometimes conflicting) norms are endorsed and enforced by different sub-sets of its membership. If we were to conduct an applied analysis of its normative structure we would need to explore these diverse norm circles and their relations with each other, both from a synchronic and a morphogenetic perspective. This would be a massive undertaking, and it would require addressing all the complexities you quite rightly highlight here.

In the end, it seems to me, our disagreement over the nature of culture reflects well on critical realism. It demonstrates that there are different ways to be realist about the social world that may be equally compatible with a realist philosophical ontology. That ontology informs but does not determine how we think of the social world. How we do think of the social must be sensitive not only to realism's philosophical ontology but also to the need for coherence with a plausible body of more specifically

social theory and with our empirical experience of the social world. Furthermore, we may disagree on some questions – here, the existence or not of something like Popper's World 3 – while continuing to agree on others – such as the value of analytical dualism and the morphogenetic cycle as frameworks for theorising the relationships between structure, culture, and agency. Above all, the very possibility of such a debate demonstrates a lack of dogmatism and an openness to debate that is of fundamental importance to the long term health of any research tradition.

Archer

I accept that we will have to settle for an amicable disagreement between us. However, in concluding, it seems worthwhile taking a step back in order to diagnose the source of our differences. These, I suggest, are twofold: (i) the first concerns the kind of contribution that we are respectively trying to make in the cultural field, whilst (ii) relates to our *sociological* interpretations and applications of realism as a meta-theory of social science.

(i) My own concern as a working sociologist is to develop and refine an analytical framework that is useful for conducting substantive analyses of why the cultural order – or part of it – is, in Max Weber's words, 'so rather than otherwise'. That is why I call the Morphogenetic approach an 'explanatory framework', in other words, a practical toolkit (Parker, 2000: 69-85). This means attempting to provide guidelines for producing particular explanations of cultural phenomena in different times and places, the most important being:

- How the prior context in which cultural interaction develops influences the form it takes

- Which relations between agents respond most closely to these influences and which tend to cross-cut or nullify them

- Most generally, under what conditions cultural interaction results in morphostasis rather than morphogenesis

On the other hand, I think you are more concerned with the philosophy of social science and with clarifying the 'domain assumptions' appropriate to undertaking any analysis of cultural phenomena. As it were, your self-imposed task is to vet what tools can legitimately be put into the tool box, rather than to provide instructions about how to use its contents as a toolkit. This is a useful job but it is a different role. Yours remains closer to Bhaskar's own designation of himself as a 'philosophical under-labourer'; mine is more that of a theoretical face-worker. Obviously, there is significant overlap between these roles or we could not have had this debate. That we have done so means we are both committed to sustaining the connection between meta-theory and substantive analysis, without which the former risks becoming entirely abstract and the latter unduly instrumentalist.

(ii) Whilst I fully agree that Realism is a Broad Church, like all such it is susceptible to the development of 'parties' within it. Increasingly over recent years, you are advancing a 'softer version', one almost impregnable to the traditional changes of reification made against Realism and also to criticisms of the misattribution of causal powers to entities that cannot be powerful particulars (Manicas, 2006; Varela, 2007). This invulnerability is because you now make a more minimalist claim that – in both the structural and cultural domains – seeks to vindicate only that 'groups influence their members', an effect you rightly call an emergent property and power. In turn, such minimalism enables your 'softer realism' to collaborate ecumenically with many more sociological approaches, even with the 'strong programme' in the sociology of knowledge, as seen in this discussion.

However, it seems to me that there is both a price to such openness and a question about its sustainability. The price is a slide towards 'central conflation'. Few will balk at 'group influence'[13] and, though you rightly insist on deeming it emergent, others will have little difficulty in incorporating it into the agenda of structuration theory, under their own descriptions. The way to avoid this happening links directly to the issue I have called sustainability. It seems insufficient to remain content with the designation of 'norm circles' (a more complex sociological task than it appears at first glance, as we have seen when discussing the case of the Roman Catholic Church) and their potential effect upon their members. The exercise of this influence is a matter of relations within the group and its relationality with other groupings (or relations between relations). Donati's development of Relational Sociology (1985: Ch 1; 1991; 2006) shows that a growing cluster of emergent properties require acknowledgement, even if the aim is limited to explaining reciprocal exchanges between Ego and Alter. This is why he regards his theoretical approach as Realist and of the non-minimal kind.

Similarly, I am non-minimalist because seeking to defend a wider range of emergent properties whose effect is to give more purchase on the analysis of substantive sociological issues. The justification is that this yields a richer explanatory programme, but it does also attract greater costs. 'High Realism' is not highly ecumenical, it creates more opponents than collaborators, and remains vulnerable to antiquated critiques that have been rebutted. Since it is crucial to get both tasks right – a warranted philosophy of social science and a justifiable explanatory programme – discussions like this one are the best way forward.

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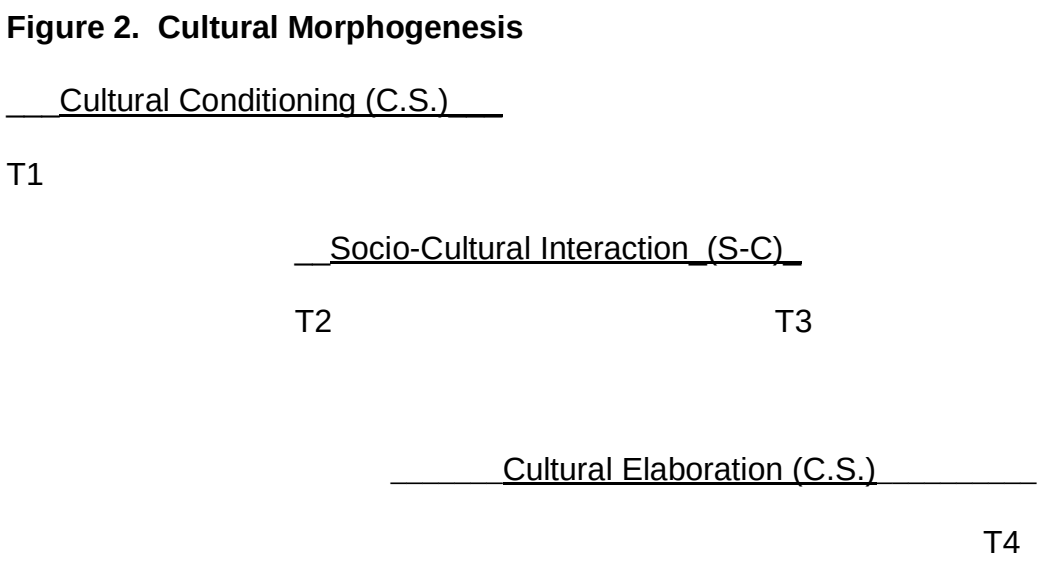
Figure 1

Cultural level	Dependent upon	Type of relations
CULTURAL SYSTEM	Other ideas	Logical
SOCIO-CULTURAL	Other people	Causal

Figure 2. Cultural Morphogenesis



[1] Dave Elder-Vass would like to thank the British Academy for their financial support. His contribution to this paper was prepared during a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship.

[2] The arguments in this paper are based upon my *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (1988). A very abridged version is found in chapter 1 of *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture* (Archer, 2005).

[3] Whether or not they are shared by some one or group is irrelevant to the existence of a contradiction. Of course, if they are, then how their holders cope is an interesting question, which Kuhn, for example, regards as important when 'anomalies' to a paradigm begin to accumulate.

[4] For a theory of the formation of agents' 'projects' in the light of their personal concerns and consideration of their social contexts, see (Archer, 2003; Archer, 2007a).

[5] On the three forms of conflation – upwards, downwards and central, see *Culture and Agency*, (Archer, 1988), Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

[6] This section draws on (Elder-Vass, 2010b).

[7] For a more detailed discussion of the process by which our beliefs and dispositions affect our actions, see (Elder-Vass, 2007b). For a response to this see (Archer, 2010a) and (Archer, 2010b).

[8] Again this echoes an argument of Bloor's (Bloor, 1974: 76).

[9] For a very clear introduction to the concept of collective intentionality, see (Gilbert, 1990).

[10] There are many complications that I have ignored here; these are discussed in much more depth in (Elder-Vass, 2010a).

[11] Elder Vass states 'culture by definition is shared by a group' (2010b: 354) and 'culture is inherently shared' (2010b: 359).

[12] I don't have space to go into the details, but both instances are well documented.

[13] Indeed, it is even quite compatible with Watkins canonical statement of methodological individualism, where acceptable predicates can include 'statements about the dispositions, beliefs, resources and *inter-relations of individuals*', (Watkins, 1968: 270-1)(italics added).