

# **Realist Critique without Ethical Naturalism and Moral Realism**

**Dave Elder-Vass**

This is a pre-publication version of a paper published in the *Journal of Critical Realism*. Please cite as:

Elder-Vass, D. (2010) 'Realist critique without ethical naturalism and moral realism'. *Journal of Critical Realism* 9:1, 33-58.

# Realist Critique without Ethical Naturalism and Moral Realism

## *Abstract*

The grounds for critique offered by Roy Bhaskar have developed over the course of his work, but two claims have remained central: ethical naturalism and moral realism. I argue that neither of these is compatible with a scientific realist understanding of values: a scientific realist approach commits one to treating values as socially produced and historically contingent. This does not, however, prevent us from reasoning about values, nor from developing critiques by combining ethical reasoning with a theoretical understanding of the social world and its possibilities. In particular, we can draw on a variety of Habermas's discourse ethics to offer provisional justifications for value-claims that support a critical stance. Thus we can develop grounds for critique that are both ontologically credible and anti-foundational, but also judgementally rational.

## *Keywords*

Critical realism; discourse ethics; ethical naturalism; Habermas; moral realism.

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

Although they generally share a critical stance towards contemporary society, different critical realists base that stance on different theoretical and indeed metaphysical perspectives. Critical realist work is thus the site of multiple, sometimes competing, grounds for critique. As we would expect, a central place in such work is occupied by the various phases of Roy Bhaskar's own thinking, in particular by the concept of *explanatory critique*, first introduced in prototypical form in *The Possibility of Naturalism*,<sup>2</sup> developed most fully in *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*,<sup>3</sup> and integrated into the dialectical turn in *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*.<sup>4</sup>

Bhaskar has used the theory of explanatory critique to justify claims for ethical naturalism and thus, it would seem, for moral realism. These claims have in turn become cornerstones both of Bhaskar's dialectic of freedom (in his dialectical turn), and of his theory of metareality (in his spiritual turn). Indeed, although it has many

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written during the tenure of a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship. I would like to thank the British Academy for their financial support. An earlier version was discussed at the Annual Conference of the International Association for Critical Realism in London, 2008, and some of the arguments were also discussed at a meeting of the British Sociological Association's Realism Study Group in June 2008. My thanks to all those who contributed to those discussions, and to Ruth Groff, Martyn Hammersley, Wendy Olsen, Alan Norrie and several anonymous referees for their extremely valuable comments.

<sup>2</sup> Bhaskar 1998 [1979], 63.

<sup>3</sup> Bhaskar 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Bhaskar 1993.

strands, one could plausibly characterise Bhaskar's work as the combination of an ontology provided by scientific realism and a critical ethics based on moral realism.<sup>5</sup>

A number of thinkers from within the critical realist tradition, however, have criticised the theory of explanatory critique. I endorse those criticisms and will argue that the claims for ethical naturalism and moral realism that Bhaskar founds on explanatory critique are ultimately untenable if we accept the ontology of scientific realism. The two central strands of his work, in other words, are in conflict with each other, as Hostettler and Norrie have argued.<sup>6</sup> This paper will argue that we should resolve this conflict by rejecting moral realism, and instead develop an alternative account of ethics<sup>7</sup> and critique compatible with the scientific realist strand of Bhaskar's work.

I begin the paper by briefly outlining the argument for explanatory critique and the criticisms that have been directed at Bhaskar's claim to derive ethical naturalism from it. I then consider the nature and role of Bhaskar's moral realism, before and after the spiritual turn in his work. Next I discuss the possibility of developing an alternative account of ethics and critique. Here I begin by discussing the metaethical implications of a scientific realist ontology of values, and go on to argue that within this framework we can develop ethical arguments by appealing to a Habermasian discourse ethics. I conclude by offering an example of a value-claim that can be supported by such arguments, thus giving us ethical grounds for critique: grounds that are consistent with, though not logically entailed by, scientific realism.

### *Ethical naturalism*

Ethical naturalism (in the sense discussed here) is the claim that we can derive values from facts. It is, in other words, the denial of Hume's well-known claim that we cannot derive an 'ought' from an 'is'.<sup>8</sup> Bhaskar makes ethical naturalism a centrepiece of his ethical theory, and justifies it on the basis of his theory of explanatory critique. The seminal statement of this claim is found in *SRHE*:

Let a belief P, which has some object O, have a source (causal explanation) S. I am going to contend that if we possess: (i) adequate grounds for supposing P is false; and (ii) adequate grounds for supposing that S co-explains P, then we may, and must, pass immediately to (iii) a negative evaluation of S (CP); and (iv) a positive evaluation of action rationally directed at the removal of S (CP).<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Hostettler and Norrie describe Bhaskar's work as 'a dialectic of realist and irrealist dialectics', the former producing 'a science of concrete being' and the latter 'a theory of the good based on an ideal state of social being' (Hostettler and Norrie 2003, 30–31).

<sup>6</sup> Hostettler and Norrie 2003. I understand that Alan Norrie no longer holds this view (personal communication).

<sup>7</sup> In general, I use the terms *ethics* and *morality* interchangeably in this paper.

<sup>8</sup> Although there is some disagreement about the exact meaning of Hume's argument (see Hudson 1983, 253–65), Bhaskar himself seems to be committed to the understanding of it offered here: Bhaskar 1991, 151.

<sup>9</sup> Bhaskar 1986, 177. *CP* stands here and throughout the debate for *ceteris paribus*, i.e. 'other things being equal'.

This is initially intended, it seems, as an argument in which O is a social structure. In one variant, S is identified with O. Here O is the cause of false beliefs about itself, and so it too, according to the argument, should be removed.<sup>10</sup> Bhaskar's formulation implies that we can deduce a value (iii) from the two purely factual premises (i) and (ii). If this were so, it would refute Hume's dictum, and establish a basis for ethical naturalist claims, though only for those values derivable from explanatory critiques. Bhaskar also expands the claim for ethical naturalism, arguing that whenever we can show that P is false (a fact), then this provides all the grounds we need to say that P is wrong (a value) and so is any action based on P.<sup>11</sup> Nor is he in any doubt about the importance of this argument:

The possibility of such a critique constitutes the kernel of the emancipatory potential of the human sciences; and the possibility of the effectivity of such a critique in human history comprises perhaps the only chance of non-barbaric, i.e. civilised, survival for the human species.<sup>12</sup>

In *Dialectic*, ethical naturalism is not only reaffirmed but also extended still further:

The real importance of the explanatory critical derivation of values from facts and practices from theories is that it can be *generalized* to cover the failure to satisfy other axiological needs, necessities and interests besides truths, including those which are necessary conditions for truth, such as basic health, education and ergonomic efficiency.<sup>13</sup>

Here we have an extension from a *cognitive explanatory critique*, which rests on the claim that the sources of false knowledge should be removed, to a *needs-based explanatory critique*, which rests on the claim that the sources of failures to meet human needs should be removed.

Bhaskar's theory of explanatory critiques has been criticised by a number of authors, several of them critical realists. Here I will focus on challenges to the move from facts to values (from (i) and (ii) to (iii)). Critics of this move have accused Bhaskar of committing what G E Moore called the *naturalistic fallacy*: the belief that a move from facts to values has been made when the supposedly factual premises already include assumptions about values.<sup>14</sup> As Hammersley puts it, 'one or more value premises are *presupposed* in any such a move', whereas ethical naturalism is the argument that the value conclusion must be 'logically derived *solely* from factual premises'.<sup>15</sup> But needs-based emancipatory critique, for example, 'smuggles a value conclusion into scientific findings... through ambiguity in the meaning of 'need'' – 'need' has a factual sense but also carries a value implication that the need should be

---

<sup>10</sup> There is also a version of the argument that applies to natural objects: Bhaskar 1986, 178.

<sup>11</sup> Bhaskar 1986, 179.

<sup>12</sup> Bhaskar 1986, 180.

<sup>13</sup> Bhaskar 1993, 262.

<sup>14</sup> See Hudson 1983, 65– 86, Miller 2003, ch. 2. Bhaskar denies the fallacy: Bhaskar 1993, 259.

<sup>15</sup> Hammersley 2002, 41.

met.<sup>16</sup> Hugh Lacey has made a similar point. He accepts that if we observe that people are suffering in a given society, and offer a theory that ascribes responsibility for this suffering to some source, then it makes sense to adopt the value judgement that the source should be negatively evaluated. However, ‘In cases like these, that the theoretical (and descriptive) categories are value-impregnated underlies the inferences’ and this means that the theory ‘was constructed in a framework that presupposes commitment to certain values’.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, in the case of Bhaskar’s cognitive explanatory critique, the prior value assumption is that false knowledge is inherently a bad thing. Of course, intellectuals practice a type of discourse in which truth is extremely highly valued. Within such a context, it will indeed follow that false beliefs and their sources should be corrected, irrespective of the immediate practical consequences. This, however, does not refute Hume’s dictum, since the disvaluing of the source of falsity depends upon the prior value assumption that truth is to be valued in the discourse. Similarly, for example, we might value truth if we believe that people who are better informed are better able to possess and exercise worthwhile autonomy in their decision making. This, I think, is a good general argument, but it is still not one that establishes ethical naturalism: it depends on the prior value assumption that autonomy is desirable.

The theory of explanatory critique, then, does not provide an adequate justification for Bhaskar’s claim to have refuted Hume and to have justified ethical naturalism. The validity of explanatory critiques always depends on premises that are already values and thus they do *not* derive facts from values.

### ***Bhaskar’s moral realism***

Moral realism is ‘the view that moral beliefs and judgements can be true or false... that moral values are discovered, not willed into existence nor constituted by emotional reactions’.<sup>18</sup> As Gideon Calder puts it in the *Dictionary of Critical Realism*, moral realism ‘insists that there are moral properties, such that it is (as it were) either *true* that rape is wrong, or it is not, and that the answer to this is independent of the way this issue is mediated by any particular perspective, tradition or process of discursive constitution’.<sup>19</sup>

Bhaskar’s commitment to moral realism cannot be in doubt; in *Dialectic*, for example, he tells us that ‘As a moral realist I hold that there is an objective morality’.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, it is worth clarifying just what it is that he is being realist *about*, since it’s possible to misuse the term.

For moral anti-realists, values are seen as causal products of some set of social, biological and agential factors; they may exist as beliefs of individuals (*personal values*) and also as norms or other moral claims endorsed and enforced by a normative community (*social values*). This view allows it to be an objective fact that an ethical claim is *considered* true in a given social context, but not that an ethical

---

<sup>16</sup> Hammersley 2002, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Lacey 1998, 487– 8.

<sup>18</sup> Honderich 1995, 596.

<sup>19</sup> Calder 2007, 184.

<sup>20</sup> Bhaskar 1993, 211.

claim could *be* universally and timelessly true. I shall call this *scientific realism about values*.

For moral realists, values are seen as being grounded by something independent of the beliefs held by any individual or social group (or even of all such groups). This reading allows it to be a fact that an ethical claim is true (in the abstract, without social qualification), by virtue of conforming to an independent truth-maker. I shall refer to these as *objective values*. The claim that there are objective values in this sense is *moral realism*, as I understand the term (and this is of course the sense given to it by Calder in his dictionary entry).

While some of Bhaskar's statements are arguably open to being read in either of these senses, ultimately it is the latter, moral realist, view to which he is committed. Consider this statement from *Dialectic*:

we must distinguish (a) *descriptive, redescriptive and explanatory critical morality* (in the transitive-relational dimension) from (b) the *actually existing, constitutive or participants' morality* or moralities (in the intransitive dimension).<sup>21</sup>

Here, Bhaskar distinguishes between two forms of morality, a critical (transitive-relational) and an actually existing (intransitive) form. The second (intransitive) form is already-established social morality, or in other words social values (though the word 'participants' suggests that he may also be thinking of personal values where they conform to such social values). The first form is open to two interpretations, *both* of which I think he intends. In the first interpretation, transitive-relational morality is that invoked by individuals (personal values) when it conflicts with the already-established social morality. In this sense, Bhaskar's distinction is useful and unobjectionable – there could be no moral change if individuals were incapable of being critical of existing social morality and advocating alternative views. In the second sense, however, this transitive-relational morality not only conflicts with the already-established social morality but is also in some sense *true*, in contrast to the falsity of the existing social morality; in this sense, then, he is referring to objective values. Almost immediately, he continues,

As a moral realist I hold that there is an objective morality. But how can it be known? This is where ethical naturalism comes in. It lies in the *transition from fact to value* (and theory to practice). So there is an ethical alethia, ultimately grounded in conceptions of human nature, in the context of developing four-planar social being, with the moral consciousness of the species in principle *open*.<sup>22</sup>

Bhaskar's meaning seems to be that there are objective values (an *ethical alethia*), and that we can know them because of ethical naturalism. Our moral consciousness is 'in principle open', in the sense that it is not fully determined by pre-existing intransitive social values. Hence, he is arguing, it is possible for us to adopt personal values that are derived from objective values – an 'explanatory critical morality,' as he phrases it in the previous quotation, derived through explanatory critique. For Bhaskar it is the distinction between these values derived by explanatory

---

<sup>21</sup> Bhaskar 1993, 211.

<sup>22</sup> Bhaskar 1993, 211.

critique and our intransitive social values that creates ‘the possibility of criticism and a fortiori critique’.<sup>23</sup>

The distinction between (a) and (b), then, does more than identifying the possibility that an individual might develop a different set of personal values than those prevalent in her society. It also refers to the possibility that those personal values can be derived from objective values, a moral reality that is independent of either individuals or social structures. And on Bhaskar’s argument, knowledge of this reality can be achieved through the process of explanatory critique.

As Andrew Collier has put it, Bhaskar’s account in *Dialectic* of the ‘relation to science of the (possible) rationality of judgements within the relativity of our knowledge at any given time, which in turn exists within an objectively real world, provides a model for an account of the objective reality of values while recognising the relativity of any particular moral code’.<sup>24</sup> But as Collier recognises, this parallel with science provides only the most sketchy justification for moral realism.

Indeed, although Bhaskar frequently asserts his commitment to moral realism, it is hard to find a concrete justification for this commitment, at least prior to the spiritual turn in his work, considered below. One possibility is that he considers that the argument from explanatory critique to ethical naturalism also justifies a commitment to moral realism (though I have not found anywhere where he explicitly makes this claim).<sup>25</sup> If it were true that we could argue from objective facts to values, independently of any prior value, this would perhaps suggest that the value conclusions of such arguments would also be objective. Of course, the fallibility of our grasp of the facts that are the premises of the argument must be conceded, and thus the fallibility of the conclusion. But could one argue that if the factual premises are about something that is at least potentially objectively true, then the value conclusion would also be? I’m not entirely convinced by this logical move, and I have already rejected its premise – ethical naturalism – but some readers of Bhaskar may have been left with the impression that some such argument justifies moral realism. Without ethical naturalism, however, this argument is entirely untenable: if critique always depends on prior value claims then it provides no way of rooting further value claims in an objective domain.

### *The ontology of values*

For a scientific realist, however, the claim that there are objective values must inevitably raise a further concern: the question of their ontology. While the ontology of personal values and social values is not necessarily unproblematic, there are viable ways of understanding their ontology, and existing debates are centred around the question of which of these is correct. We might say, for example, that personal values are beliefs or dispositions, which are emergent properties of human beings that depend materially on their biological/neurological constitution and causally on the history of their social interactions.<sup>26</sup> Social values, on the other hand, might be considered emergent properties of social groups, and thus ontologically dependent on

---

<sup>23</sup> Bhaskar 1993, 211.

<sup>24</sup> Collier 1998, 692.

<sup>25</sup> This claim is however made in Hartwig 2007, 153, fn. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Elder-Vass 2007.

the personal values of the members of those groups.<sup>27</sup> Both of these arguments will be explored further below. Objective values, however, if they are independent of both personal and social values, must have some other ontological foundation, if they have any at all.

Could they be some other type of actual properties, or actual entities? If they are properties, what entities possess them and what mechanisms generate them? What are the morphogenetic and morphostatic causes that bring them into existence and sustain that existence?<sup>28</sup> Perhaps the morphogenetic question is the most telling one here: how could objective values have come into existence in the first place? Neither personal nor social values could have existed prior to the evolution of inter-communicating social animals; indeed their initial development is more or less synonymous with such evolution. In the absence of answers to these questions, we must doubt that objective values can exist in the *actual* at all.

But if objective values are independent of personal and social values, does Bhaskar believe that they could precede human beings and their sociability? It is hard to avoid the conclusion that he does, and this points to an important dimension of his moral realism. The sorts of questions I have asked in the previous paragraph are extremely important in establishing the ontology of *actual* entities and properties, but Bhaskar does not offer answers to them. I suggest that this is because he is *not claiming* that objective values belong to the domain of the actual; for Bhaskar, moral realism refers to values that are *real* but not actual.<sup>29</sup> This would imply that we can ignore questions of their material ontology, but it still leaves at least two crucial questions. First, in what way are objective values real, given that they are not actual? And second, how could they interact with the material world so as to have any explanatory relevance to it?

Similar issues arise for real causal powers, and part of the significance of Bhaskar's scientific realism is the answers it offers to these sorts of questions. Indeed, since personal values are properties of human individuals, and (I argue) social values are properties of social groups, scientific realism implies that there are corresponding real causal powers. To take the case of personal values, it would seem that whenever an individual's neural network is configured in a certain (partial) pattern (though neural science is currently unable to specify this pattern), then they will believe in a certain value. To believe in a certain value is to have a tendency to act in certain ways, and thus is a causal power. Such causal powers are transfactually real: the fact that they will exist whenever the corresponding neural pattern is instantiated is true, regardless of the existence of any individuals in which it actually is instantiated. Hence we could say that personal (and by analogous argument, social) values are instantiations of an objective causal power. However, such values are objective only as causal powers; this does not make them objectively *right*. Racist personal values, for example, are just as objective in this sense as anti-racist ones. What Bhaskar is offering us is values that are objective in the more ambitious sense of being objectively *right*.

Still, the case of real causal powers suggests that it is possible in principle for there to be a real-but-not-actual domain and for us to know (fallibly) about it. This is

---

<sup>27</sup> Elder-Vass 2008.

<sup>28</sup> I discuss the use of such questions to examine the ontology of social objects in Elder-Vass 2007.

<sup>29</sup> On the real/actual distinction, see Bhaskar 1978, chapter 1.



the parallel that Collier refers to above. But how is the parallel argument to be constructed for objective values? This is the significance of explanatory critique and the claim to ethical naturalism: they purport to provide a means for us to know the moral real-but-not-actual, one that parallels the scientific methods which give us a means to know real causal powers. This is perhaps why Bhaskar is so insistent that explanatory critique provides a refutation of Hume's dictum. If, instead, he was to concede that it merely helps us to derive one value from another, then it would no longer offer a bridge between the actual and the morally real. Once it becomes clear that explanatory critique cannot do this job, it seems that Bhaskar is asking us to believe in objective values while failing to show how they could be made consistent with his scientific realism.

### *Grounding objective values*

One attempt to overcome this problem can be traced in the use that Bhaskar makes of Habermas's argument that a commitment to certain values, such as truth, sincerity and normative appropriateness, is implicit in *communicative action*.<sup>30</sup> Habermas develops this into the concept of an *ideal speech situation*, in which there is not only a commitment to these values but also a commitment to set aside power differences between the participants for the purpose of achieving understanding and consensus – a commitment, arguably, to a certain sort of justice between the participants.<sup>31</sup> Bhaskar picks up this argument and extends it:

values must be immanent (as latent or partially manifested tendencies) in the practices in which we engage, or normative discourse is utopian and idle... But if there is a sense in which the ideal community, founded on principles of truth, freedom and justice, is already present as a prefiguration in every speech-interaction, might one not be tempted to suppose that equality, liberty and fraternity are present in every transaction or material exchange; or that respect and mutual recognition are contained in the most casual reciprocated glance?<sup>32</sup>

However, doubt must be cast on even the initial version of the argument. Habermas defines *communicative action* as 'the type of action aimed at reaching understanding' Habermas 1991, p. 1. But not all speech interactions are directed at the achievement of mutual understanding. Many of them would be more realistically represented as *strategic action*, which is directed instrumentally at the achievement of the speaker's goals. Although communication honestly directed at mutual understanding can perhaps be seen as carrying an implicit commitment to values such as truth and justice, there is no obvious reason why this should be the case for strategically motivated speech interactions. Granted, the speaker in such an interaction may sometimes simulate the values of the ideal speech situation, thus implicitly calling on the listener to attribute such values to her even though she is not in fact observing them, and this might lead us to see them as immanent even in strategic communication. But in such cases it would seem more accurate to see the *negation* of such values as immanent in the speech act. Furthermore, strategic communications

---

<sup>30</sup> Habermas 1991.

<sup>31</sup> Habermas's argument is discussed in more detail below.

<sup>32</sup> Bhaskar 1986, 210.

need not invoke the values of communicative action at all. When an authority figure says ‘Do x or else...’, for example, there is no prefiguration of truth, freedom and justice in this speech act. It is only when we bring a commitment to these values to our speech that we are engaging in communicative action: they are not intrinsic to speech interaction as such. Such arguments apply *a fortiori* to material exchanges and reciprocated glances. What kind of respect is contained in reciprocated glances of fear, hatred, or contempt?

A more substantial attempt to justify a belief in objective values (though one that suggests a certain continuity with this argument) comes in the shape of the ‘spiritual turn’ in Bhaskar’s thought, the turn to meta-reality. Whatever else may have prompted it, one of the roles that the spiritual turn plays is that it offers a potential remedy to the lack of an adequate grounding for moral realism in his earlier thought. Let me briefly indicate how he attempts to do this.<sup>33</sup>

Meta-reality is a level beyond or behind ordinary reality. Bhaskar now refers to ordinary reality as *demi-reality* and sees it as a kind of imperfect shadow of meta-reality. Meta-reality is ‘simultaneously a “fine structure” or “interior”... upon which demi-reality is parasitic, and also a distinct potential that can be liberated to produce a new emergent mode of existence’.<sup>34</sup> Bhaskar offers a transcendental deduction of the existence of meta-reality from the ability he believes we have to experience *non-dual states*: a sense of ‘fundamental connections with what we otherwise perceive dualistically (from the position of the egotistic “I”...) as a discrete external environment’.<sup>35</sup> His argument is that we could not feel such a sense of connection unless there was some real underlying unity of which we are not otherwise aware. As Jamie Morgan puts it:

This unity is the fine structure in its most general form, which he terms the ‘cosmic envelope’. Bhaskar sees this as the basic constituent of a concretely singularized and differentiated complexity that is the universe. Since this basic constituent is common to everything, Bhaskar identifies it as logically entailing all within all. By this he means that (working backwards through the logic of emergence) all possibilities must be inherent in previous times and prior forms of matter... Thus, emergent and stratified being has a connecting commonality. He therefore refers to all within all as ‘co-presence’.<sup>36</sup>

Co-presence would have no human significance if we had no way of accessing it, but the possibility of accessing it at some level is taken to be implicit in a non-dual state. Still, non-dual states may be nothing more than a vague sense of connection, and Bhaskar suggests we can achieve a stronger awareness of co-presence and its implications through becoming attuned to our *ground state*: ‘Being in or attuned to one’s ground state means being maximally aware of the fine structure of reality as it is manifest in the individual and through them to the whole’.<sup>37</sup> Bhaskar believes that love is the key constituent or characteristic of such a ground state, and that becoming

---

<sup>33</sup> This account draws heavily on Jamie Morgan’s very clear explanation and careful critique of Bhaskar’s theory of meta-reality in Morgan 2003

<sup>34</sup> Morgan 2003, 123.

<sup>35</sup> Morgan 2003, 124.

<sup>36</sup> Morgan 2003, 125.

<sup>37</sup> Morgan 2003, 125.

attuned to it leads to a recognition of human reciprocity and ‘generates right-action that will provide the momentum for positive self and social transformation (eudaimonia through universal self-realization)’.<sup>38</sup>

Here, then, we have a replacement for explanatory critique: a mechanism that, Bhaskar now argues, gives us access to the morally real. Now morality, like all other potentials, is coded back into the nature of basic matter, and is thus supposedly available for access by those capable of getting in touch with their ground-state. The difficult question of the ontological status of the morally real is to be resolved by placing ‘the essential ethical truth that lies within being’<sup>39</sup> within each and every one of us. And it seems that we can each learn how to access it by taking lessons from Eastern mystics.

Now, as Morgan makes clear, this is an enormously ambitious metaphysical edifice to construct on top of the contentious claim that we experience non-dual states which are indicative of some deeper connection to the universe. It seems just as plausible, and far simpler, to argue that any such sense of non-duality is an illusion, and that there is no underlying connection to the external world.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, even if we were to accept Bhaskar’s argument for the existence of meta-reality and thus for the ontological nature of the morally real, his account of how we can obtain access to objective values is still remarkably weak. *A Realist Theory of Science* provides us with a sophisticated materialist account of the scientific process that explains how it could give us (fallible) access to an understanding of real causal powers. But it is not at all clear what the equivalent material process is for accessing the morally real; and if it is indeed to adopt Eastern mystic practices, it is not at all clear how the process could work.

Meta-reality, then, despite offering a new development of the argument for moral realism in the shape of the metaphysics of co-presence, does not seem to resolve the fundamental inconsistency between Bhaskar’s scientific realism and his moral realism. Instead, as Hostettler and Norrie have suggested, it leaves him with an idealist and an untenably foundationalist basis for critique.

### *Scientific realism and critique*

Unless and until a more tenable argument can be offered, then, there is no foundation for moral realism that is compatible with scientific realism; indeed, it is difficult to see how there ever could be. Scientific realists must surely agree with Mackie that ‘There are no objective values.’<sup>41</sup> Consistent critical realists should therefore discard moral realism and instead accept the socially contingent nature of morality. Many, however, may be concerned about the potential consequences of such a move. In particular, they may be concerned that it implies an extreme constructionist account of morality, leading to the postmodern assertion that no morality is more valid than any other, and thus to the impossibility of taking a critical stance towards society. The remainder of this paper will argue that it does not: that scientific realism,

---

<sup>38</sup> Morgan 2003, 128.

<sup>39</sup> Hostettler and Norrie 2003, 36.

<sup>40</sup> Morgan 2003, 142.

<sup>41</sup> Mackie 1977, 15.

even though it must reject foundationalism about values, is compatible with the development of judgementally rational grounds for critique.

Contemporary moral philosophy distinguishes between *first-order* ethical questions, such as whether it is wrong to steal, *second-order* questions, such as the merits of utilitarianism and Kantian notions of ethics as duty, and *meta-ethics*, which examines questions such as whether moral discourse states facts, whether such facts can exist, in what form, and how we could know them if they did.<sup>42</sup> Roughly, we could say that first order questions are concerned with what it is good or bad to do, second order questions with how to decide what is good or bad to do, and metaethics with the nature of what we are doing when we consider ethical questions. My argument so far has been a critique of Bhaskar's metaethics. In order to present the outline of an alternative, and to demonstrate that it is at least potentially capable of giving us judgementally rational but non-foundationalist grounds for critique, the remainder of this paper will proceed in three stages. First it will briefly outline an ontology of ethics and touch on some of its other metaethical implications. Second, it will show that there is a viable second-order ethics that is consistent with this metaethics – a version of Habermas's discourse ethics. Third, it will show how we might apply this second-order ethics to produce some judgementally rational first-order ethical arguments that offer potential grounds for critique.

One point must be stressed from the outset: I do not claim that any one of these steps is logically entailed by its precursor(s). The objective of this paper is not to *derive* necessarily true grounds for critique from a scientific realist ontology; to do so would be a performative contradiction of my thesis, since it would make those grounds objectively true and thus reinstate moral realism, and it would derive them from facts and thus reinstate ethical naturalism. Instead, there are fallibilities and contingencies at each stage of the argument.

At the first stage, for example, while realists would argue that there is an objectively true scientific ontology of norms and values as they exist in contemporary societies, our knowledge of this ontology is always partial, provisional, and fallible. Whether the particular ontology offered here is generally sound is ultimately a matter for empirico-theoretical validation, and not for metaphysical fiat.<sup>43</sup> At the second stage, there may be a number of second-order ethical arguments that are consistent with the metaethics of the first stage, and in making a case that one such argument is judgementally rational I do not exclude the possibility that others are also viable. All that is necessary for me to establish my case that scientific realism about values allows us to be judgementally rational about critique is that there is at least one second-order ethics that we can justify within the metaethical framework. At the third stage, similar considerations apply – there may be many other first-order ethical arguments that are compatible with the earlier stages of the argument, but all I need to show is that there is at least one such argument and that it gives us potential grounds for critique.

These fallibilities and contingencies are not weaknesses in my argument. They are built into the very nature of morality, from the perspective of moral anti-realism. It is the attempt to deny them that marks out moral realism and ethical naturalism as

---

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Miller 2003, 2.

<sup>43</sup> On the distinction between scientific and philosophical ontologies, see Bhaskar 1986, 36 and Elder-Vass 2007, 231.

ultimately untenable. Instead of denying them, we must find ways to reason about ethics that recognise and accept these contingencies.

### *A scientific realist metaethics*

Metaethical debates amongst analytical philosophers have revolved around the question of cognitivism. Cognitivists think that moral judgements express beliefs and that such beliefs can be true or false, whereas their opponents think that they express some other kind of state, e.g. emotions or desires.<sup>44</sup> Closely related (though perhaps less commonly debated) is the question of what it is that moral beliefs or other moral mental states *refer* to, if they refer at all. In the terms of this paper, the question of cognitivism relates to the nature of our *personal values*; whereas the question of reference relates to whether our personal values refer in some way to *objective truth-makers*, or perhaps to *social values* (though this latter possibility is ignored by many moral philosophers).

We may approach the ontology of personal values by first asking what kinds of effects personal values have.<sup>45</sup> The effect that is relevant for us is that they affect our actions, which is possible, I argue, because they take the form of beliefs and dispositions. As I have argued elsewhere, beliefs and dispositions are emergent properties of our neural networks, which arise historically as a result of our interactions with our social environment and then influence the process in which our actions are determined.<sup>46</sup> The distinction between beliefs and dispositions is simply that beliefs are dispositions that we have articulated into propositional form. These beliefs and dispositions include our personal values – norms, for example, that we believe we ought to conform to, which may be backed by emotional commitments.<sup>47</sup> In this account our personal values can not be identified exclusively with one of the traditional types of mental property – beliefs, desires, or emotions, for example – but rather involve an interaction between several such types. They exist primarily as dispositions to act in particular ways, dispositions that are emergent properties of our neural networks, but they can nevertheless be articulated in propositional beliefs and thus we can reason about their validity. It therefore seems reasonable to treat them as cognitive even though they are not *simply* propositional beliefs.<sup>48</sup>

The cognitivist claim that our personal values have a cognitive component that can be evaluated as such, however, does *not* entail the further claim that those beliefs *refer* to objective moral truth-makers and should be evaluated by their correspondence to them. Indeed, I have already argued that there are no such objective values. What, then, do they refer to?

---

<sup>44</sup> Miller 2003, 3.

<sup>45</sup> We could begin instead with one of several other ontological questions. See Elder-Vass 2007.

<sup>46</sup> This is discussed in some detail in Elder-Vass 2007, 335– 341.

<sup>47</sup> In some respects, this account of values is similar to that offered recently in Gibbard 2008, 15.

<sup>48</sup> This linking of beliefs and dispositions, incidentally, helps to overcome the problem of ‘how to account for the internal link between moral judgement and motivation’ (Miller 2003, 35).

A compelling answer to this question is provided by John Mackie. Mackie, as we have seen, denies that there are objective values, but he goes on to argue that ‘ordinary moral judgements include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values ... [and this] assumption has been incorporated in the basic, conventional, meanings of moral terms’.<sup>49</sup> But this ‘claim to objectivity, however ingrained in our language and thought, is not self-validating.’<sup>50</sup> Hence we need what Mackie calls an *error theory* of values, ‘a theory that although most people in making moral judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false.’<sup>51</sup> In other words, it appears to us in everyday life that our moral claims are reflections of objective values, and when we make such claims we use linguistic constructions that reflect this appearance, but we are mistaken.<sup>52</sup>

Mackie, however, does *not* carry this argument to the relativist conclusion that our moral claims have no external source at all and hence that we can modify them just as we choose. Instead, he argues,

Moral attitudes themselves are at least partly social in origin: socially established – and socially necessary – patterns of behaviour put pressure on individuals, and each individual tends to internalize these pressures and to join in requiring these patterns of behaviour of himself and of others. The attitudes that are objectified into moral values have indeed an external source, though not the one assigned to them by the belief in their absolute authority<sup>53</sup>

Furthermore, this objectification serves a vital purpose: it lends our moral claims an air of authority that is essential if morality is to be effective in its social task of regulating our behaviour.<sup>54</sup>

Our personal values, then, are a product ‘at least partly’ of what I have called *social values* and if there is something external that they refer to, it is not objective values but these social values. Elsewhere I have examined in some detail the processes by which social groups committed to particular norms contribute causally to producing a commitment to those same norms in individuals.<sup>55</sup> Such commitments may seem to us to derive from the objective nature of the norm concerned, but what is objective about such norms is *not* their moral justification, but only the social fact that they are accepted and endorsed by other people.

Sometimes, of course, our personal values diverge from the prevailing social values, but none of us develops our morality from scratch. We are all socialised initially into a set of social values, and it is only as our critical faculties develop that we start to reconsider these. In the face of perceived inconsistencies within our system of values, or between it and external facts, we may amend our individual personal

---

<sup>49</sup> Mackie 1977, 35.

<sup>50</sup> Mackie 1977, 35.

<sup>51</sup> Mackie 1977, 35. The concept of an error theory is drawn from Locke’s account of colour: Miller 2003, ch. 6.

<sup>52</sup> Habermas has briefly outlined a similar argument: Habermas 2003, 275.

<sup>53</sup> Mackie 1977, 42–3. The resemblance to Durkheim’s explanation of belief in the external authority of religion is striking: see Durkheim 2001 [1912], 170.

<sup>54</sup> Mackie 1977, 43, 119.

<sup>55</sup> For example, in Elder-Vass 2008 and Elder-Vass forthcoming.

values, and perhaps ‘with others... put pressure on some fragments of the system’<sup>56</sup> of social values. Still, even when we do this, the grounds upon which we justify our new values will tend to be drawn from our old values. Here, then, we have a process of socio-cultural change that conforms to the models provided by Bhaskar’s Transformational Model of Social Activity and Archer’s *morphogenetic cycle*.<sup>57</sup> Critique itself works by influencing the ethical reasoning, the values and the decisions of others. As such it is part of a social process that begins from prevailing social values and leads through ethical debate and material interactions to the reproduction but also the gradual transformation of those values.

So far, then, I have offered a brief overview of the nature of personal and social values and a brief causal account of their inter-relationship. Causal accounts of the development of our personal and social values, however, do not in themselves constitute *justifications* of those values, in the way that moral realist accounts of objective values purport to do. The metaethics presented here, then, must be complemented with a compatible second-order ethical theory if it is to provide a route to critique.

### *Discourse ethics*

The process of developing our ethical or moral values is necessarily a process of socio-cultural interactions, of conversations, of moral discourse and debate. Without such a process personal values can never impact upon social values and hence upon the personal values of others. As writers as diverse as Marx, Foucault and Archer have demonstrated, however, such cultural processes are strongly influenced by social power and thus tend to produce values that consolidate the interests of those in power. In societies where power is heavily concentrated in a minority, such processes tend to produce structures of social values that seem unjust to those who hold democratic and egalitarian values. One promising approach to second-order ethics, then, is to focus on these processes in which our values are developed, and to seek to eliminate or minimise those aspects of the process that tend to produce what appear to be unjust outcomes.

Here I would like to build on Habermas’s work on communicative action, but using it very differently than Bhaskar does. Instead of taking Habermas’s work to justify the claim that certain values are immanent in human action, we can use it to examine how a *process* of practical reasoning might be considered rational.<sup>58</sup> Given that norms and values are concerned with how to regulate our relations with each other, it seems rational to argue that moral reasoning should be a *discursive* process, one that allows all those who are involved in those relations to participate in reaching an agreement.

---

<sup>56</sup> Mackie 1977, 148.

<sup>57</sup> Archer 1995, Bhaskar [1979] 1998.

<sup>58</sup> Habermas uses the term *ethical* in two different senses. In his earlier work he adopts the broad sense used in this paper; in the later work he restricts it to discourse on the nature of the good life. See Habermas 1993, ch. 1. However, he continues to call his account of moral agreement *discourse ethics* despite the inconsistency with his new terminology.

Furthermore, to achieve genuine agreement, such a process would need to meet the conditions of Habermas's ideal speech situation – not only truthfulness on the parts of the participants but also that everyone concerned is freely able to participate, and to have their views considered with equal weight and respect, regardless of differences in power. As Habermas puts it, 'If the participants genuinely want to convince one another, they must ... allow their ... responses to be influenced solely by the force of the better argument'.<sup>59</sup> In other words, ethical reasoning is rational when it is able to resolve conflicts of interest by producing outcomes that adhere to Habermas's discourse principle: '*Just those action norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourses*'.<sup>60</sup>

It is not enough, however, for us to speculate on what norms the affected persons *could* agree upon, as John Rawls does, for example, in his well known *Theory of Justice*.<sup>61</sup> According to Habermas, 'What is needed is a 'real' process of argumentation in which the individuals concerned cooperate'.<sup>62</sup> As Habermas recognizes in his later work, however, the requirements of the ideal speech situation can never be perfectly realised in any actual speech situation.<sup>63</sup> It is an *ideal type*, in Weber's sense: it can never exist in its pure form. Furthermore, in large communities such as most modern states, it is impossible to give all members of the community – or even more than a tiny minority – a genuine opportunity to participate in such debates.<sup>64</sup> And there is no guarantee for any particular question that discourse *could* produce agreement, even if the discourse was conducted fully in the spirit of the ideal speech situation.<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, ideal types like this one do provide us with an analytical resource, since we can analyse actual speech situations by examining the extent to which they do or do not conform to it. Hence Habermas's argument does give us some standards by which to assess processes of moral debate. To the extent that such processes are (i) conducted honestly and sincerely; (ii) open to participation by all affected parties or at least their genuine representatives; and (iii) not distorted by the differential power of the parties;<sup>66</sup> they entitle us to make the claim that it is rational for all members of the community concerned to take ethical judgements made or validated in such processes as correct – although always potentially open to further revision.

Neither Habermas nor I believe that this provides us with 'ultimate justifications' of those norms that appear on the whole to conform with the discourse principle.<sup>67</sup> As he puts it, 'An ultimate justification of ethics is neither possible nor necessary'.<sup>68</sup> The best we can hope for is that we can find good – but never infallible

---

<sup>59</sup> Habermas 1993, 31.

<sup>60</sup> Habermas 1996, 107 (emphasis added). Also see Habermas 1990, 66.

<sup>61</sup> Rawls 1971.

<sup>62</sup> Habermas 1990, 67. My thanks to John Mingers for pointing this out to me.

<sup>63</sup> Habermas 1993, 56.

<sup>64</sup> Habermas points out that participants in discourse are usually aware that 'the circle of participants is highly selective'. Habermas 2003, 107.

<sup>65</sup> Habermas 1993, 59.

<sup>66</sup> Habermas provides a similar list of conditions in Habermas 2003, 107– 8.

<sup>67</sup> Habermas 1990, 77.

<sup>68</sup> Habermas 1993, 84. It is clear from the context that Habermas is using *ethics* here in the wider sense of his earlier work.



– grounds to justify particular norms or values, and discourse ethics provides us with a particularly well justified method for doing so. When a norm or a value appears to meet the standards of the discourse principle as closely as is practically possible, we have good reason to consider it valid. In the next section I will give an example of a value that appears to meet this criterion and thus offers judgementally rational grounds for critique.

Before thus moving on from second order ethics to first order ethics, let me make some important supplementary points. First, the argument for discourse ethics is not in itself ethically naturalist. Although Habermas often seems to argue that it is derived from facts about the nature of communicative action, discourse ethics itself depends on value presuppositions. Whatever the nature of communicative action, we must add to the facts of the matter a commitment to democratic egalitarian values to derive discourse ethics from it.<sup>69</sup> This might seem circular, but this is not a vicious circularity; if our commitment to democratic egalitarianism can itself be justified within the framework of discourse ethics then we have an internally coherent system. Given the impossibility of finding an ultimate justification for ethics, this is the best that we can hope for.

Second, discourse ethics is potentially compatible with other second-order ethical arguments. Within a discourse ethics framework, for example, it would be perfectly possible to advance further second-order claims, such as arguments for consequentialist or deontological approaches to ethics.

Third, I make no claim that discourse ethics is logically entailed by scientific realism, nor that it depends on scientific realism.<sup>70</sup> But it *is* consistent with the scientific realist ontology of values advanced in the previous section, and this is all my argument requires. It provides a consistent and coherent way for democratic egalitarian scientific realists to ground critique.

### ***What should we value?***

If we are to build critiques on such grounds, however, a further step is required. We need, not just a discourse ethics, but some actual norms or values that pass the discourse principle test, which we can then employ as (provisional) standards by which to judge the social world and alternatives to it. This section will argue that there are already first-order ethical claims that have passed this test, to the extent that this is practically possible, and that provide us with potential grounds for critique.

At first sight there are two substantial obstacles to such a claim. The first is the need for discursive agreement to be *global*. The most fundamental first-order ethical questions have implications that cross national boundaries, and thus the set of ‘all possibly affected persons’ whose consent is required extends across the globe. But also it is only by securing global acceptance that we can overcome the problem of relativism. Once we have abandoned the illusion of moral realism, relativism ceases to be a metaphysical problem and instead becomes a *practical* problem. The issue that

---

<sup>69</sup> Habermas himself recognises a connection between the presuppositions of discourse and ‘egalitarian universalism’: Habermas 2003, 107.

<sup>70</sup> Hence it would not be a problem for my argument if Habermas himself were not a realist, though in fact he is a realist in the pragmatist tradition: Habermas 2003, 2– 3, 30– 36.

confronts us is no longer the moral realist's problem of how to discover universal values that are *in principle* immune to criticism, but now becomes the problem of how to identify values that are *in practice* more-or-less universally (if provisionally) acceptable.

The second obstacle is the difficulty of eliminating the effects of unequal power from the discursive process. The reality of the current world order is such as to exclude the vast majority of humanity from global processes of debate, and even when their representatives have a seat at the table, there are at least two levels at which inequalities of power may interfere with the process. On the one hand, these representatives may themselves be members of elites with narrower interests that are different from and in some respects even contradictory to those of many of the people they purport to represent. And on the other, their voices may have little weight due to their lack of power relative to the holders of *global* political power, and indeed they may be pressurised into supporting those power holders. Where such power imbalances are implicated in the production of claims that disadvantage the less powerful we are entitled to be sceptical about their rationality. Discussions in international organisations that seem to produce agreement on the value of free trade are one obvious example.

It is significant, however, that one of the central reasons advanced in support of free trade is that in the long run it benefits everyone. We do not need to accept this claim for free trade to be struck by the ethical grounding of the argument in a claim to *value all humans*. I suggest that this claim is used to ground the more dubious case for free trade precisely because it is taken to be one that all affected persons would agree to, and furthermore that it is taken to be such a claim because it is in fact accepted and used by the less powerful members of the international community. More obvious applications of this principle can be found in United Nations declarations on human rights. Despite biases in the detail of such declarations arising from international imbalances in power, they are clearly grounded in an internationally shared claim to value all humans.<sup>71</sup> Nor should we discount the agreement on valuing all humans on the grounds that it arises from an exercise of the power of the dominant. On the contrary, it is a claim that has been hard won over a long period by the insistence of the formerly colonised and marginalised that their lives should be valued as highly as anyone else's. Furthermore, it is a claim that is advanced as grounds for political arguments, not only in relatively elitist international organisations but also by grass-roots organisations around the world.

In other words, I suggest, the moral claim that we should value all humans is widely accepted as a result of a long-running process of ethical reasoning and debate that despite its many imperfections has been minimally rational in the sense that the views of the less powerful have been effectively heard. This is a claim, in other words, that in a pragmatic sense meets the requirements of Habermas's discourse principle.<sup>72</sup>

The implication is that it is judgementally rational to ground ethical arguments in the claim that we should value all humans. Such a claim need not depend upon moral realism or ethical naturalism. Nor is it threatened by the recognition that our

---

<sup>71</sup> For useful discussions of these biases, see Morgan 2005, Woodiwiss 2003.

<sup>72</sup> I should stress that it is because we can reasonably argue that this value has, to the extent pragmatically possible, met the requirements of the discourse principle that I consider it judgementally rational – *not* simply because it is widely accepted.

basic value claims are to some degree historically specific, socially situated, and provisional. We can still be judgementally rational about values and critique while recognising these limitations.

Furthermore, if we can take the argument that we should value all humans as discursively justified, then it becomes possible for us to construct further ethical arguments that take this as a premise. For example, one plausible argument constructed on this premise is offered by Assiter and Noonan: that all humans have basic objective needs such as food, water, clothing, and shelter without which they could not survive, hence there is an ethical obligation to support the meeting of such needs.<sup>73</sup> Clearly the conclusion depends upon the premise that we should value all humans, and it is a rather minimal implication of valuing humans that we should support their staying alive, assuming that they rationally wish to do so. If we accept both this value premise and the factual claim that for humans to stay alive then these basic needs must be met, then this is a piece of ethical reasoning which it is judgementally rational for us to accept. More generally, once we have made certain basic value claims, others may follow from the introduction of further facts, though these arguments too must be open to discursive challenge.

This kind of argument opens the way to a rather weak form of ethical naturalism; one that seems to derive values from the nature of human beings, but does so on the prior basic value premise that we should value all humans.<sup>74</sup> This kind of ethical naturalism is analytically distinct from the much stronger variety that I have criticised above. The strong variety says that we can derive values purely from facts; the weak variety builds value claims by combining basic value premises with factual claims about the ‘nature’ of something, hence the label ‘naturalism’. There is nothing about the second type of argument that is ethically naturalist in the first sense.

A further extension of the principle that we should value all humans is embodied in the *capabilities approach* developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.<sup>75</sup> This approach focuses on what is required in order to provide people with ‘a bare minimum of what respect for human dignity requires’, arguing that to do this we must provide them with a certain number of ‘central human capabilities’, such as life, health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination, and emotions.<sup>76</sup> Although she believes that these are universal human needs and indeed starts from an Aristotelian position on the nature of the good, Nussbaum makes no claim for ultimate justification of this approach: ‘the argument begins from ethical premises.’<sup>77</sup> Hence this is a form of what I have called weak ethical naturalism. Furthermore, as one would expect from ‘an approach that is respectful of each person’s struggle for flourishing’,<sup>78</sup> Nussbaum is not seeking to impose this view monologically. On the contrary, she has engaged in ‘years of cross-cultural discussion’,<sup>79</sup> particularly with groups of women concerned with the needs of the poor and powerless in less

---

<sup>73</sup> Assiter and Noonan 2007.

<sup>74</sup> For example, Andrew Sayer’s ‘qualified ethical naturalism’: Sayer 2005, 212–24, 2008.

<sup>75</sup> For a clear overview, comparison and evaluation of Sen and Nussbaum’s approaches, see Gasper 2004, ch. 7.

<sup>76</sup> Nussbaum 2000, 5. Her full list of central capabilities is provided on pp. 78–80.

<sup>77</sup> Nussbaum 2000, 83.

<sup>78</sup> Nussbaum 2000, 69.

<sup>79</sup> Nussbaum 2000, 76.

developed countries, hence her approach has been reshaped in a process that bears a striking similarity with the requirements of Habermas's discourse principle. Her work is oriented to the achievement of 'a transnational overlapping consensus on the capabilities list... Such a consensus already exists about some items on the list, and we may hope to build from these to the others'.<sup>80</sup>

We might question the possibility of ever securing widespread agreement on a list as detailed as Nussbaum's.<sup>81</sup> However, it seems plausible to suggest that if we exclude the objections of those with material interests in denying certain capabilities to others (as the discourse principle would seem to demand) agreement may be possible on at least some of the general principles. To the extent that this is true, the capabilities approach is important not just because it shows how discourse ethics can proceed from very basic value claims like 'value all humans' to more substantive moral claims, but also because these are moral claims that we can measure the real social world against. When organisations, institutions, policies and people fail to deliver or protect these central capabilities, we have a case for criticising them.<sup>82</sup>

Critique, however, does not automatically follow from believing that we should value all humans, for at least two reasons. First, we cannot assume that this is the *only* value that matters for a critical politics.<sup>83</sup> Practical evaluations require the interplay of a whole range of values as they apply to different aspects of the situation. Secondly, critical arguments depend upon theory and facts as well as values. Given, say, that capitalism has harmful consequences, a series of substantive questions arise regarding our options. What alternative courses of action are open to us that might make a difference? To what extent would any given course of action reduce or remove these harms? What other consequences would it have for things that we value? We may need to consider a wide range of alternative courses of action and their likely consequences across all of the things that we value.<sup>84</sup> Both here, and in considering the relation between competing values, rationality is further increased by involving others in the decision – by resorting again to discursive democracy.

This move from values to evaluations is just as important to any critical politics as the previous move, in which we establish our values. One might argue that critique is rarely concerned with specific action decisions, but the same issues arise when we talk about strategy or policy in more general terms. As soon as we turn from value principles to their application we must consider how they interact, both with other values and with material possibility.<sup>85</sup> We can be judgementally rational about

---

<sup>80</sup> Nussbaum 2000, 104.

<sup>81</sup> For further discussion of the viability of Nussbaum's list, see Gasper 2004, 185–9.

<sup>82</sup> Indeed, Sen's work has led to the measurement of some of these capabilities becoming embedded in the United Nations Development Programme's annual Human Development Reports, thus providing striking evidence of failures to meet basic human needs. See Fukuda-Parr 2003.

<sup>83</sup> It seems possible, for example, that demands to value both wider groups (other animals, as well as humans) and narrower ones (our own family, for example, in preference to other humans) might also meet the demands of discourse ethics.

<sup>84</sup> Sayer 2000, ch. 7.

<sup>85</sup> Such a process of critique rests not only on ethics but also on our theories of the social world. The focus of this paper on the ethical dimension of critique is in no way intended to diminish the role of theory in critique.

such moves, but not because there can be any necessary deduction of actions from values from facts.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper has argued that explanatory critique does not provide a viable route from facts alone to values, and that neither explanatory critique nor metareality constitute viable arguments for the moral realist claim that there are objective moral truth-makers. Hence, if we are to preserve the critical component of critical realism we must identify other grounds for it. I have argued that we *can* do so, and have made some steps towards justifying an approach to critique that is consistent with scientific realism. I began from the social ontology of values, which exist as properties of human individuals and of normative communities. As personal beliefs, actual values are causally influenced by social context, with the consequence that they are historically contingent, fallible, provisional, and open to debate.

Within this metaethical framework it is impossible to establish particular ethical conclusions either absolutely or monologically; an ethics for scientific realists cannot be logically entailed by any properties of human beings, for example, or of the natural world; nor can it be derived by individual thinkers in isolation from the rest of humanity. Nevertheless, within these limits it is possible to find ways of being judgementally rational about critical arguments. We can conduct moral discourse in an inclusive process of debate that conforms as far as practically possible to Habermas's discourse principle. Such debates enable us to take account of other perspectives and sometimes to reach provisional agreement on basic values. We can then reason (but still subject to discursive agreement), not from facts to values, but from combinations of facts and basic values to more specific value principles. And we can reason (and debate) from value principles to strategies and policies by taking account of the interacting value principles and material possibilities involved in the case concerned.

In renouncing objective values, then, we need not renounce the possibility of justifying critical positions. We overcome relativism, from this perspective, not by the metaphysical fiat of moral realism, but through a process of discursive democracy through which we establish an unforced agreement on basic values. None of this holds out the illusory promise of critical certainty that some might find in moral realism, but I claim that the kinds of critical reasoning described here can nevertheless be well enough grounded to provide a basis for a progressive politics. Furthermore, that very lack of certainty offers us the most precious benefit of non-foundationalist critique: it demands a humility in our critical stance that leaves us open to new critical arguments motivated by the previously unheard needs of the least powerful and most oppressed in our social world.

### ***Bibliography***

Archer, Margaret 1995. *Realist Social Theory: The Morphogenetic Approach*.  
Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Assiter, Alison, and Jeff Noonan 2007. 'Human needs: a realist perspective.' *Journal of Critical Realism* 6(2): 173– 98.

- Bhaskar, Roy 1978. *A realist theory of science*. 2nd ed. Hassocks: Harvester Press.
- Bhaskar, Roy 1986. *Scientific realism and human emancipation*. London: Verso.
- Bhaskar, Roy 1991. *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bhaskar, Roy 1993. *Dialectic: the pulse of freedom*. London: Verso.
- Bhaskar, Roy [1979] 1998. *The possibility of naturalism*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge.
- Calder, Gideon 2007. 'Ethics.' In *Dictionary of critical realism*, ed. M. Hartwig, 183–86. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Collier, Andrew 1998. 'The power of negative thinking.' In *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, eds M. Archer, R. Bhaskar, A. Collier, T. Lawson and A. Norrie, 688–94. London: Routledge.
- Durkheim, Émile 2001 [1912]. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. trans. C. Cosman. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Elder-Vass, Dave 2007. 'A method for social ontology.' *Journal of Critical Realism* 6(2): 226–49.
- Elder-Vass, Dave 2007. 'Reconciling Archer and Bourdieu in an emergentist theory of action.' *Sociological Theory* 25(4): 325–46.
- Elder-Vass, Dave 2008. 'Integrating institutional, relational, and embodied structure: an emergentist perspective.' *British Journal of Sociology* 59(2): 281–99.
- Elder-Vass, Dave forthcoming. *The Causal Power of Social Structures*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Fukuda-Parr, Sakiko 2003. 'The Human Development Paradigm: Operationalizing Sen's Ideas on Capabilities.' *Feminist Economics* 9(2–3): 301–17.
- Gasper, Des 2004. *The Ethics of Development*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Gibbard, Allan 2008. *Reconciling our Aims*. New York: Oxford UP.
- Habermas, Jurgen 1990. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Habermas, Jurgen 1991. 'What is universal pragmatics?' In *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, ed. T. McCarthy, 1–68. Cambridge: Polity.
- Habermas, Jurgen 1993. *Justification and Application*. trans. C. Cronin. Cambridge: Polity.
- Habermas, Jurgen 1996. *Between Facts and Norms*. trans. W. Rehg. Cambridge: Polity.
- Habermas, Jurgen 2003. *Truth and Justification*. trans. B. Fultner. Cambridge: Polity.
- Hammersley, Martyn 2002. 'Research as emancipatory: The case of Bhaskar's critical realism.' *Journal of Critical Realism* 1(1): 33–48.
- Hartwig, Mervyn 2007. 'Review of 'Critical Realism Today: New Formations 56'.' *Journal of Critical Realism* 6(1): 148–57.
- Honderich, Ted, ed. 1995 *The Oxford companion to philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Hostettler, Nick, and Alan Norrie 2003. 'Are critical realist ethics foundationalist?' In *Critical Realism: The difference it makes*, ed. J. Cruickshank, 30–53. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hudson, W. D. 1983. *Modern Moral Philosophy*. Second ed. London: Macmillan.
- Lacey, Hugh 1998. 'Neutrality in the social sciences.' In *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, eds M. Archer, R. Bhaskar, A. Collier, T. Lawson and A. Norrie, 473–502. London: Routledge.
- Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: inventing right and wrong*. London: Penguin.
- Miller, Alexander 2003. *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Morgan, Jamie 2003. 'What is Meta-Reality?' *Journal of Critical Realism* 1(2): 115–46.

- Morgan, Jamie 2005. 'Ought and is and the philosophy of global concerns.' *Journal of Critical Realism* 4(1): 186– 210.
- Nussbaum, Martha C. 2000. *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Rawls, John 1971. *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Sayer, Andrew 2000. *Realism and Social Science*. London: Sage.
- Sayer, Andrew 2005. *The Moral Significance of Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Sayer, Andrew 2008. 'Understanding lay normativity.' In *Nature, Social Relations and Human Needs: Essays in Honour of Ted Benton*, eds R. Stones and S. Moog. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Woodiwiss, Anthony 2003. *Making Human Rights Work Globally*. London: Glasshouse Press.