DEFINING OBJECTIVITY IN REALIST TERMS

Objectivity as a Second-Order 'Bridging' Concept

Part II: Bridging to Praxis[1]

BY

JAMIE MORGAN AND WENDY OLSEN

I was too young, my father said, to get anything solid from philosophy, which would only teach me to quibble with my elders and be wise in my own conceit.   (Mary Renault)

Abstract. Our aim is to explore and develop notions of objectivity that are useful and appropriate for critical realist empirical research. In Part I, we provided an initial definition that introduced the idea that objectivity is a value that must be chosen but that its significance is rooted in a series of other epistemological and ontological matters. We also addressed why it is worthwhile in realist terms to develop the notion of objectivity, and began to develop a revision of the concept to recognise the role of subjectivities. This, we maintain, is an important clarification in developing social research. Part II explores the linkages between objectivity and situated action. In Part II we argue that the growth of knowledge requires engagement and critical analysis. We develop the idea that if subjects are engaged through multiple standpoints, then objectivity becomes significant as a lever of agency in the service of dialogue and debate and of transformations. Again, our aim is to be of use to practical researchers by providing underlying arguments. Specifically, we argue that objectivity is a bridge between the subjectivities of subjects and the rest of the real world. In so doing, the paper works through various desirable characteristics of an adequate theorisation of knowledge that could make objectivity (as redefined) part of the ontological underpinnings as well as the daily practices of a realist researcher. Objectivity thus links philosophical work to the everyday work of realist researchers.

Key words: objectivity, situated objectivity, standpoint feminism, values, MacIntyre

---

[1] 'Part I: Valuing Objectivity' appeared in *Journal of Critical Realism* 6(2) (2007): 250–66.

equinoxonline

Reprise and Introduction

In Part I of this paper we set out some of what we think are the key elements in defining objectivity and began to work towards the idea that objectivity is a second-order construct – a concept whose sense is related to the way in which problems of epistemology and ontology are understood and theorised. In §1 our main point was that the problem of objectivity arises precisely as a subset of what it means to talk about the real (however termed by proponents of different positions) and what that talk suggests concerning human potential to know, make and do. Accepting or refusing objectivity is to accept or refuse (explicitly or implicitly) a panoply of claims about the interface between ontology and epistemology (and the relationship of subjects). It is these that form the frame-work within which we move from what it means to say that there is something to refer to, to the subsequent matter of in what sense reference is possible, and it is how we understand the nature of this possibility that gives rise to how we return to think about the engagement of knowledge – its development, the ascription of and withdrawal of its status – and what objectivity can mean. In §2 our main point was that objectivity begins with subjects and that this implies that it is a value-commitment. It begins here because objectivity is an attitude of mind of self-conscious subjects who in a broad sense choose. This raises two immediate questions. First, why choose objectivity as a value? Second, what is one choosing when one either accepts or rejects objectivity as a value? We explore some aspects of these two questions in §§3–6 below.

In §3 we argue towards objectivity as a lever of agency and begin to address the problems of power and variable values this might raise. In §4 we continue to develop points arising from these problems in terms of the debate on situated objectivity in feminist discourse. A key issue is that if objectivity is a lever of agency it is a choice that affects how we then go on to make choices. How we think about the fallibility of knowledge and the nature of other values than objectivity are affected by how we understand objectivity. To be situated is not to be trapped. Here we begin to make the argument that objectivity can be about how subjects approach knowledge claims and how transition between them is possible. This is an open-ended process implying also the requirement to be objective about objectivity. In §5 we make the claim that to exemplify objectivity is analytically distinct from the realisation of knowledge that may also be true. Objectivity is no more or less than the search for truth that is always limited by the nature of the interface within which it resides and which makes it something we should value. It is knowledge formation as an active process engaged with an active reality in a reflexive way. Since knowledge formation is tentative, claims conditional and standpoints, values and attitudes variable, objectivity is both complex and vital because it allows us

to make sense of different aspects of incommensurability and of how we transit between knowledge forms as subjects in a potentially transformative way. Alisdair MacIntyre's work provides a useful way of looking at this. Finally in §6 we make the point that, though aspirational, objectivity is not thereby utopic because it invites us to confront rather than surrender before the complexity of the subject. It is in many respects precisely the opposite of utopian – read as mere wishful thinking or fancy – because it requires us to think concretely. As part of a commitment to the idea that one must be objective about objectivity we turn the analysis back on critical realism to highlight some of the limits of objectivity that also underscore why it is something we should value and why it is something that we ought to choose – why it is the necessary that need not be.

3. *Why Choose Objectivity as a Value?*

As we began to argue in §1 in Part I, the insight that objectivity is a second-order construct makes developing a concept of objectivity a crucial fulcrum in the interface between discourses of epistemology and discourses of ontology for the subject. In realist argument the relationship between epistemology and ontology is multifaceted. Arguments for the significance of a certain conceptual structure – depth realism – in ontological argument are derived in part from a critique of the limits of knowledge. One can, for example, take *A Realist Theory of Science* to make this point.[2] Science has practices and forms of justification that differentiate it from belief-only. More significantly science can be aspect-of-reality-effective; that is, it can allow us to manipulate some part of the world. However, its claims are not infallible, its practices are not omnipotent and its observations as confirmations are discontinuous and patchy. This leads to the conclusion that there is a difference between knowledge and experience and between the empirical and the fully contextualised real; that is, the significance of ontological argument is derived from the practical and discursive limits of science as a knowledge form. Moreover, a substantive but dualistic ontological point is thereby made. On the positive side, reality has depth. On the negative side, a philosophy of science that tries to account for scientific practice without making the inference to depth will create either an epistemic or ontic fallacy precisely by focusing on surface relations. Such an account may have the initial status of knowledge but it is the critical failure to account for failings, in terms of its points of reference, that constitute a significant justification for the validity of ontological argument.

---

[2] R. Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Leeds: Leeds Books, 1975).

This is important for our understanding of objectivity. Critique itself is a crucial aspect of knowledge as an active process where the status of knowledge is given and withdrawn. This in turn is the sense in which truth as correspondence must act as a norm. In the above case, it is the process of recognising a critical failure that is the trigger for the refutation of one argument (empiricism) and the acceptance of another (critical realism), which simultaneously entails a transforming shift in perspective that acknowledges, in this sense – not every sense – the separation of ontology and epistemology. The conclusion is reached through the intermediary of concepts and critique that are always from within positions but indicate that no position can be a prison because we manifestly transit. The process of transition can be precisely an actualisation of an instance of objectivity. But this view of objectivity only has sense if we consider objectivity as an attitude that enables an interpellation by the subject between competing arguments that have a problem-point of reference and some link to empirical investigation – in this case the nature of scientific practice. It is this aspect of reference that makes the transition between positional arguments more than simply a free-floating affair of rootless rhetoric and persuasion. In terms of the complexity of the interface (see Part I) between ontology, epistemology and an open reality for the subject, the possibility of reference to is mutually implicated with the possibility of better, more 'adequate' argument based on a transition in claims and justifications. The axis of transition is the genuine ability of the subject to reflect critically on the full panoply of implications of argument, including evidence. This, of course, is an open-ended process, it is no guarantee that argument is by definition superior, and that the subject is not mistaken. If it were then we would be thinking about a very different kind of reality with very different kinds of subjects (one with no interface problem perhaps).

An attitude or value of objectivity is thus also the aspiration (as well as possibility-expectation) of more adequate argument based on the notion of reference. Objectivity is rooted in the possibility that knowledge can be improved and that progress in adequating is possible (which is by no means the same as to state that the ways in which knowledge progresses make societies more progressive). Since objectivity is a subject characteristic it further implies a subtext of openness to the possibility of better argument and the necessity of taking that possibility seriously through ongoing investigation. It presupposes an agent who in Margaret Archer's terms cannot be reduced to the structures within which they exist and through which they are socialised. It thus also presupposes that choosing is a real characteristic with real effects and that therefore what is chosen and on what basis is a central and vital aspect of and for the human condition. Objectivity then can be understood as a chosen lever of agency.

Such a point is saved from the abstract utopic rhetoric some critics find in a Habermasian 'ideal speech' situation precisely because it recognises a crucial sociological aspect of what we do and makes sense of one reason why we do it – there is something to argue about that is more than one argument and another.[3] It is not the false abstraction of an imaginary state set up as an instructive thought experiment. It is, as Archer's position on agency suggests, part of what it means to be a subject.[4] The suggestion then is that objectivity is a value commitment that is necessary because it is a bridging concept for realism precisely because of the nature of reality and because of the nature of subject-practice and its possibilities within reality. If it is chosen this is the basis on which it is chosen.

The choice is always tentative because it confronts our own scepticism. It does so because one of the facets of a difference between epistemology and ontology, and between the two and fuller reality is that alternative accounts to the one presented are possible and can be persuasive. They too account for aspects of reality from different views even when they are refuting the very possibility of determinations that are a partly comprehended 'real'. Foucauldian power/knowledge may ultimately be fatally flawed as social theory but it is also highly seductive in the claim that power/knowledge and discourse produce subjectifications.[5] For Foucault, they are in one way more than simply a matter of ideology as false consciousness or false knowledge and they are less than knowing as knowledge of the fixed, found and discovered. This grey world seems to puncture objectivity because it makes the concept seem no more than a power play, a rhetorical stance in a grab for authority in the interplay between one knowledge form and the next. From this perspective it does not seem irrational to reject objectivity, understood as an approach to progressive adequating knowledge claims. Rather it seems liberating because one is rejecting an oppressive discourse. But what one is rejecting is the fixed, found and discovered as the very definition of what knowledge is and what refer *to* implies. Yet the act of rejection itself relies on a fixing of the meaning of knowledge (that it is not and never can be the fixed, found and discovered),

---

[3] On Habermas see A. Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979), Ch. 10, and *Social Theory and Modern Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), Ch. 5.

[4] For Archer on Habermas in general see M. Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), Ch. 10. For additional useful analysis see W. Outhwaite, *New Philosophies of Social Science: Realism, Hermeneutics and Critical Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education 1987), Ch. 5.

[5] On positive readings of realism and Foucault see J. Joseph, 'Foucault and reality', *Capital & Class* 82 (2004): 143–67; and F. Pearce and A. Woodiwiss, 'Reading Foucault as a realist', in *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, eds J. López and G. Potter (London: Athlone, 2001).

sufficiently stable to allow a determination to be made and a rejection of a definite form to be enacted. The choice itself is an objective act rejecting a 'false' form of knowing and then understanding this as progress towards freeing the subject for new and liberating subjectivities. This is the justification of belief to some purpose in the pursuit of more adequate (defined implicitly as freeing) ways of knowing. This justification is itself a knowledge claim.

This is a form of objectivity in practice, as we would understand it, without a sense of the formal commitment that has been enacted. It is in itself at another level an ideological act of false consciousness because it misapprehends the very nature of what the choice implies and that the very capacity for choice offers – in some sense the possibility of choosing 'well' (freeing) on false premises through unintended self-contradiction. The very capacity to do so, as critical realists hold in analytically separating agency and structure, highlights that subjects cannot be reasonably conceptualised as subjectifications. If they could be conceptualised as such then the problem focus itself (consciousness, self awareness, choice, critique and its conditions) would dissolve. The problematic nature of this dissolution can then only be compounded when the subject is brought back in, as say, for example, Foucault attempts, in order to create a post-Enlightenment emancipatory discourse.

There is a more prosaic aspect to this if we think of objectivity as a lever of agency. If we accept that choices are real and have consequences and that part of choosing well can be more adequate knowledge it follows that how we perform and what we make are also rooted in the problem of the possibility of reference. Reference becomes an issue of making sense of the characteristics of the real, which are understood as active rather than as fixed; that is, refer to is about something that is real in its characteristics and mechanisms that also includes potential – reality is an open construct. How could it be anything else if humans are as we think we are (including the Foucauldian error)? Objectivity then ought not to be refused in terms of a conflation of reference and the fixed and found; objectivity can include openness to openness, if that is where plausible argument and knowledge claims leads us in terms of the mutuality of epistemology and ontology.

Why choose objectivity as a value? Because it represents an aspect of something we do, if imperfectly – reasoned consideration and transition between positions – that, if real as a capacity of the human, is also absolutely central to the potential of the human, namely the nurturing, making and developing of the human and her place in the world. This point is sometimes lost because critical realism starts from philosophy of science and scientific practice and critics often do not get much further than associating it with discourse of this type. There is a tendency to see its roots in terms of the arid language of mechanisms as though this were a Newtonian-Laplacian matter that, despite works such as

The Possibility of Naturalism, cannot deal with the complexities of the social.[6] It is certainly true that to some degree it has not – especially the problem of language.[7] But this is not the same as cannot, and in terms of objectivity entails certainty from doubt – one cannot be objective about society. Yet in context, to deny objectivity is to do more than simply refuse oppressive discourses of science and their effects on society, such as positivism, or to conflate critical realism with such discourses. It is to do more than simply marginalise 'retrogressive' ideas about reality as a constraint or put aside the tiredness of age-old metaphysical questions speculated on by living and dead white males. It is to confuse the complexity of the problem of what it means to be human with individual aspects of it, such as the genuine problems of language, persuasion, power, agreement, consensus and so on. These are aspects of complexity created by the reality of the subject – they are part of why one aspect of the interface problem (the knowing investigating subject within a structured time and place) is complex. In a sense they are the emergent problematic complexities of the solution humans have evolved and developed to productively engage with the world, including each other. This is how Noam Chomsky, for example, in his refutation of behaviourism and empiricism sees the problem of language:

> A central problem of interpreting the world is determining how, in fact, human beings proceed to do so. It is the study of the interaction between a particular, biologically-given, complex system – the human mind – and the physical and social world.[8]

For Chomsky, knowing and language are no less complex and productive because they are rooted in biology. Rather, to hold otherwise is to radically separate the human as subject, from other subjects and from the world. This would raise the ontological question of what kind of reality would enable such a dislocation. It would also manifestly contradict the ethical purpose of the contemporary social theories that use such a strategy of refusal. This has created a particular and instructive problem field for 'situated objectivity' in terms of power.

---

6 R. Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* (Brighton: Harvester, 1979). For comments on the language of mechanisms see J. Shotter, *Conversational Realities* (London: Sage, 1993), Ch. 4; see also, A. King, 'The impossibility of naturalism, the antinomies of Bhaskar's naturalism,' *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 29(3) (1999): 267–88.

7 For comment see J. López, 'The difference that it makes, in theory', in *Critical Realism: The Difference it Makes*, ed. J. Cruickshank (London: Routledge, 2003). For further development of language and realism see, J. López, *Society and its Metaphors* (London: Continuum, 2003); A. Sealey and B. Carter, *Applied Linguistics as Social Science* (London: Continuum, 2004); N. Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003).

8 N. Chomsky, *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom* (London: Fontana, 1972), 13.

4. *Situated Objectivity and the Problem of Power*

If objectivity is a lever of agency it is a choice that affects how we then go on to make choices. It is a value that affects other values that we hold. To say that knowledge is fallible because it is grounded in reference is to accept that one can be wrong. This further implies openness to critique and the necessity of argument and engagement including concerning objectivity itself. The choice between arguments (and for subjectivity as a rejection of objectivity) is real because it could be made – thinking subjects choose. It is real because it has consequences for that person's reasons for acting and for the further conceptual meanings of the form of society it helps to reproduce. Objectivity must be sensitised to power and to scepticism because it requires us to be sensitised to the nature of the knowing subject and thus to the ramifications of the capacity for choice itself. This is so because otherwise objectivity would be self-contradicting. This needs to be said because we are always battling with our own fear of meta-narrative.

These are precisely the problems that Donna Haraway and Sandra Harding have been grappling with in terms of feminist standpoint epistemology. As both note, the problem has been that early standpoint epistemologies tended to be problematic in terms of realism and objectivity. According to Haraway:

> I think my problem and 'our' problem, is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world.[9]

According to Harding this requires us to think about standpoints in a broader sense:

> The starting point of standpoint theory – and its claim that is most often misread – is that in societies stratified by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, or some other such politics shaping the very structure of a society, the *activities* of those at the top both organize and set limits on what persons who perform such activities can understand about themselves and the world around them … The experiences and lives of marginalized peoples, as they understand them, provide particularly significant *problems* to be explained or research agendas. These experiences and lives have been devalued or ignored as a source of objectivity-maximising questions – the answers to which are not necessarily to be found in those experiences or lives but elsewhere in the beliefs and activities of people at the center who make policies and engage in social practices that shape marginal lives. So one's social situation enables and sets limits on what one can know; some social situations – critically

---

[9] D. Haraway, 'Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14(3) (1988), 579.

unexamined dominant ones – are more limiting than others in this respect, and what makes these situations more limiting is their inability to generate the most critical questions about received belief.[10]

In addition to the meta-narrative problem, what both are concerned with is the link between standpoints in terms of different ideas of values, the problem of knowledge and its grounds. It is this that leads them both to focus on objectivity as an important value for feminist standpoints. This in turn focuses our thinking once more on objectivity as a second-order construct because its plausibility and substance ought to flow from the persuasiveness of first-order claims about seek to *know* and refer *to*. The key issue they raise is that of 'having it both ways', by which they mean justifying a position as a knowledge claim that is inherently also valuing and also one within many that is content to remain one within many. This broadens the question of why one might choose objectivity by raising the challenge of what one is choosing when one chooses a concept of objectivity that confronts the situated.

What Haraway and Harding's works point to is that knowledge is not only fallible but also situated in the sense of arguing for the significance of a particular position. Here they continue to grapple with the problem of the God's-eye view (infallibility, total vision, trans-historical understanding, foundationalism – the view from nowhere and everywhere, certitude …). The problem posed is that in refusing a God's-eye view the basis of one claim (of one group against another) or of movement or transition from one claim to another seems to be rendered groundless. Differences become discrete and hermetically sealed creating the problem of justifying values and of equating or commensurating knowledge claims. These are problems that continue to hamper situated objectivity precisely because it tends to take as its point of reference and refutation the God's-eye view rather than framing the problem of objectivity in terms of aspects of the interface between ontology and epistemology and so on, where a systematic and consistent ontology (such as critical realism) is articulated.

This is in some respects more a matter of unfinished business than a serious defect in their arguments because Harding and Haraway's works are not only a call for objectivity but also exemplars of it in process. The significance of the feminist standpoint is not that it is fixed but rather that the viewpoint and conditions of its focus (women) has an epistemic privilege; that is, investigating it reveals important aspects of the condition of women but also the condition of society in terms that might be counter-phenomenal to societies' own dominant (patriarchal) beliefs about its forms, functioning and legitimacy based on the effects of power and the asymmetries of power. The assertion of epistemic

---

[10] S. Harding, 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology: what is "strong objectivity"?', in *Feminist Epistemologies*, eds L. Alcoff and E. Potter (London: Routledge, 1993), 54–5.

privilege is therefore, although a value commitment, a potentially corrigible one because it is not simply dogma; it is a positional argument because it constructs understandings and makes claims that entail broader relations and explanations of women within society that are extensional and engaged. The standpoint is therefore also potentially active as a knowledge claim and in terms of its justifications. As such it can be responsive to other standpoints as well as internally responsive to critique and dialogue within different branches of feminist theory and from these in terms of evidence and claims on society and its mechanisms. This adds a positive and democratic nuance to the claim to be 'one among many' because that one is communicative rather than corralled. Harding and Haraway's explorations of the debate between empiricist feminism and varieties of standpoint feminism illustrate this. Their works are a form of objectivity in terms of a critique that illustrates the possibility of transition in terms of knowledge forms. They are also a form of objectivity in terms of the narrower sense of the transitions within a particular broad position (feminist theory). But one must also be objective about the articulation of objectivity and see that too as an open-ended process of active knowledge formation. The situated objectivity debate also illustrates this. A great deal of the work by Harding and Haraway in this field is objectivity at a meta-level because they are claims about the nature of claims rather than narrower issues of specific explanatory accounts of women's position within given societies. And even here, they are unfinished in the sense that more could be said concerning the problems of commensurability, values and ethics as issues for objectivity. This in turn allows us to address how objectivity is not only a lever of agency but a lever of freedom in §6.

5. *Situated Objectivity and the Complexity of Incommensurability and Values*

It is important to understand what objectivity about objectivity means. If objectivity is a value applied to how we transit as subjects between knowledge claims, it is by no means a guarantor that movement is in some sense by definition more adequating. There can be no guarantor of this, only an understanding that it is possible because knowledge is about something other than itself. To exemplify objectivity is analytically distinct from the realisation of knowledge that may also be true. Objectivity is no more or less than the search for truth that is always limited by the nature of the interface within which it resides and which makes it something we should value. It is knowledge formation as an active process engaged with an active reality in a reflexive way. Crucially, we do not make decisions about knowledge and between knowledge claims on the basis of certainty, nor do we transit on the basis of certainty; we choose on the basis

of plausibility because there is no God's-eye view. Alan Montefiore goes some way towards this position:

> It is the underlying knowledge that there are no definitive answers to be found, no ultimately objective ground to be finally secured, no absolute or 'Gods-eye' perspective to be attained; and yet with it also the knowledge that the existence of all these remain as the indispensable postulate and goal of a never to be abandoned search.[11]

However, his phrasing remains metaphorically problematic in that stating an aspiration towards that of which one has denied the possibility is all too easily rendered paradoxical by critics. One could, for example, maliciously construct something along the lines of Eubiledes liar paradox – here perhaps: *A subject about which the critical realist knows nothing is ignorance*. As such, a phrasing in terms of the multifaceted significance of objectivity rooted in the complexity that gives rise to the impossibility of the God's-eye view seems more consistent.

Of course, acknowledging the impossibility of the God's-eye view introduces multiple possibilities for counter-argument and it is this that besets situated objectivity. One might, for example, be pessimistic and state that an uncertain process of reference implies that we become locked into rules, institutions and structures of particular knowledge forms, whether of values (as assumptions as values affecting interpretations and selection, as ethical codings affecting how *I* should proceed or live, as aspects of moral systems that bind societies and transnational socialities) or of other theories and forms of investigation. For the pessimist these are then iterated because they affect what we think of as plausible; this could be thought of as socially located but referentially dislocated paradigm shifts and irreconcilable paradigm competition – a milieu of differentiated and distinct value systems and of incommensurable arguments.

MacIntyre's work helps to put these problems of values, incommensurability and objectivity into perspective. MacIntyre notes that the ordinary-language use of the term objectivity equates it with 'objectively true' and associates this with general assent (any reasonable person made familiar with the case would agree that).[12] We would note that, from both a critical realist and a correspondence point of view, analytically speaking, there can be no necessary link between general assent and 'objectively true': the truth of a claim cannot reside in consensus. If it did, truth would be no more or less than universal acclaim. Similarly, objectivity in the formation or consideration of a knowledge claim cannot be directly equated with 'objectively true'. If it were claims would be

---

[11] A. Montefiore, 'Reason and its own self-undoing?' in *Defending Objectivity*, eds M. Archer and W. Outhwaite (London: Routledge, 2004), 255.

[12] A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 2nd edn (London: Duckworth, 1985).

hard facts in the sense of logical empiricist identities – Richard Rorty's mirror of reality.[13] One cannot, therefore, and MacIntyre does not, think of objectivity in terms of its ordinary-language use. In building a fuller understanding of the term, disagreement and variation are core issues that need to be addressed and then directed to the problem of values that situated objectivity wrestles with.

The central question that motivates MacIntyre's work is: what is the significance of disagreement and variation in values as instantiated in societies and articulated through theories? In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, MacIntyre addresses the problem of incommensurability.[14] For MacIntyre the problem of incommensurability cannot be *easily* disposed of in social theory by a call to reason per se, and then judgemental rationality thereafter. MacIntyre defines judgemental rationality as the capacity for definite reasoned choice between positions. He says it cannot be used in this simplified sequence precisely because the explicit conjoining of reason and judgemental rationality resides in one of the versions at issue – that of the Enlightenment project (epitomised by Gifford's Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). MacIntyre makes the general point that in social theory and in forms of debate about values, disagreements persist and do so for extended periods. A simple deployment of the Enlightenment-project argument about disagreement, therefore, jars with sociological fact. That fact must be accounted for to create a fuller understanding of why disagreement persists. With this in mind he makes the specific point that judgemental rationality cannot be simply understood as the deployment of evidence and argument against another's position where the superior account thereby necessarily triumphs (the rational individual judges and accepts) because this not only reduces to the ordinary-language concept of objectivity but also confuses the way that subjects assimilate and confront evidence and argument. Stocks of knowledge, including values, theories of other kinds, and so on, are integral to the subject in a way that militates against easily discarding them because they *can* form part of the way in which the subject confronts alternatives:

> It is important to understand first of all that such incommensurability cannot be recognized, let alone characterized adequately, by those who inhabit only one of the two conflicting conceptual schemes. For these latter the problem of understanding the position of the other will appear a problem of translation: how can we render *their* beliefs, arguments, and theses into *our* terms? The projects of translation designed to answer this question will be judged to have succeeded or failed by the standards of those who inhabit a particular scheme within which they are formulated. Insofar as it is judged a failure, the

---

13   See R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980); R. Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

14   A. MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London: Duckworth, 1990).

contentions of the rival scheme will appear untranslatable and so unintelligible. They will then fail to constitute any kind of challenge. But insofar as the task of translation is thought to have been successfully performed, it can only be because and insofar as the idiom of the alternative scheme has been rewritten into the conceptual idioms native to the translator's own scheme. This will ensure in any case distortion and characteristically distortions which render the competing theses and arguments into a form in which they appear either compatible with or refutable from the standpoint into whose terms they have been thus distortingly rendered … It domesticates the intellectually alien intruder before demonstrating to such an intruder the *a priori* impossibility that such an invasion could challenge one's own most fundamental convictions.[15]

This is particularly so in domains where values are strongly held and are important to the way in which the subject identifies themselves and others. It is for this reason that MacIntyre finds some plausibility in a second rival version of social theory, genealogy (which he reads primarily from Nietzsche but also from Foucault). In MacIntyre's analysis genealogy focuses on the hidden aspects by which knowledge (specifically Enlightenment reason, which MacIntyre illustrates using the *Encyclopaedia*) is articulated and presented – its writing and strategy:

> For the genealogist this appeal to timeless rational principles has the function of concealing the burden of the past which has not been discarded at all, and the comprehensive and unitary conception of reason in the name of which this appeal is made has the corresponding function of providing an unwarranted privileged status to those who identify their own assertions and arguments with the deliverance of reason thus conceived. So the genealogists' narrative is designed to disclose what its authors take the encyclopaedists' narrative to conceal. The genealogists' narrative has two strands to it, one a history of that which the genealogists aspire to undermine by such disclosure, the other the history of the genealogists' own project and of the evasions and stratagems without which the genealogist would inevitably fall back into just those modes which he or she is concerned to repudiate or expose.[16]

For MacIntyre, these positions (putting aside the third, which is not required to establish the point) are articulated as diametric opposites. Genealogy equates reason with writing strategy and power and uses this to refute the Enlightenment project, whilst Enlightenment thinking and the standard articulation of judgemental rationality refute genealogy on the basis that their writing strategy deploys reasoned argument (despite its 'evasions') to distinguish between points of view.[17] MacIntyre is aware that these are extreme versions

---

[15] MacIntyre, *Three*, 113.
[16] Ibid., 79.
[17] Which is of course, to a degree, what we have done in looking at Foucault's work.

of each, but that is precisely his point. In process each actually expresses and acknowledges aspects of the other because both actually contain, and in argument acknowledge, aspects of each. Derrida in many of his writings and Foucault in his later ruminations on Kant and on Frankfurt School critical theory, for example, do so.[18] Crucially, therefore, the sociological persistence of each is not just about difference; it is about the way each is rooted in a common problem field that neither transcends. Thus incommensurability is both a real sociological fact and an indication of the commonalities of partial knowledge forms. For MacIntyre this allows some sense of reasoned judgement back in precisely because of reference in much the way we have been discussing:

> In judging of truth and falsity there is always some ineliminable reference beyond the scheme within which those judgements are made and beyond the criteria which provide the warrants for assertability within that scheme. Truth cannot be identified with, or collapsed into warranted assertability. And a conception of *what is* which is more and other than a conception of *what appears to be the case in the light of the most fundamental criteria governing assertability within any particular scheme* is correspondingly required, that is, a metaphysics of being, of *esse*, over and above whatever can be said about particular *entia* in the light of particular concepts.[19]

Here MacIntyre accords with the general notion that there is always the need for ontological argument and for investigation that acknowledges and pursues reference to the real. But he also acknowledges the complexity of the subject as part of that real, and of her location that gives rise not only to the real perpetuation of disagreement but also to one way in which things change:

> To understand why, if the phenomenon of incommensurability is approached from a standpoint which insists that the translation of the idiom of one rival alternative conceptual scheme into that of another is a precondition for some-

---

[18] 'To concern oneself with the founding concepts of the entire history of philosophy, to deconstitute them, is not to undertake the work of the philologist or of the classic historian of philosophy. Despite appearances, it is probably the most daring way of making the beginnings of a step outside of philosophy. The step "outside of philosophy" is much more difficult to conceive than is generally imagined by those who think they have made it long ago with cavalier ease, and who in general are swallowed up in metaphysics in the entire body of discourse which they claim to have disengaged from' (J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference* [London: Routledge, 1978], 355). 'To recognize and respect all its classical exigencies is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. Without this recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say anything' (cited in C. Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, [London: Routledge, 1991], 152). For affinities with the Frankfurt School despite Habermas's critique, see M. Foucault, 'Interview with Gerard Raulet', *Telos* 55 (1983): 195–211. For Foucault reconsidering the Enlightenment project see his 'What is Enlightenment?', in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow, (New York: Pantheon, 1984).

[19] MacIntyre, *Three*, 122.

one who inhabits that scheme to understand the contentions advanced by the proponents of the other, that phenomenon will appear as illusion enables us to ask and answer the question of what conditions must be satisfied if genuine incommensurability is to be recognized and characterized. It can only be recognized and characterized by someone who inhabits both alternative conceptual schemes, who knows and is able to utter the idiom of each from within, who has become so to speak a native speaker of two first languages. Such a person does not need to perform the act of translation in order to understand … They are the inhabitants of boundary situations generally incurring the suspicion and misunderstanding of both the contending parties.[20]

One might, perhaps, suggest that it is precisely this that accounts for much of the difficulty critical realists face in debate (although it might just be that they are systematically wrong). One might also note that MacIntyre's position seems to accord quite closely with the idea that one way in which we transit is through immanent critique. Indeed, the concept of immanent critique is an important one here because any subject is capable of such. Although knowledge, values, and so on form parts of our identity and are important to us, affecting how we read and interpret, few individuals are permanently and absolutely defined by any given position as a unitary and distinct way of constructing a wholesale identity; to do so requires a major refusal and is why we describe those who try as fundamentalists and consider them with suspicion. Identity and its sources are ordinarily more fluid. The first articulation and development of explicit knowledge claims from boundary positions may be the work of exceptional individuals but the movement across boundaries through points where they dissolve, and where incommensurability becomes greyer, need not be. One does not need to think of transition as a *wholly* reasoned act of *Star Trek*-style Vulcan-like intellectual logic (although we tend to reconstruct it this way when considering the act retrospectively as judgementally rationalised). One does not need to think of epistemological crisis as a Wall Street Crash of the Soul, nor of the boundary individual as a form of functioning schizophrenic. To do so would be to accept, for example, the hard version of genealogy or the Enlightenment project as self-evident and complete in a way that MacIntyre was at pains to show they were not.

MacIntyre's interest in these matters is as a philosopher of values and it is in this sense that his work is of interest to the problem of situated objectivity and to objectivity in general because, as we have noted, differences of values provide an area of contention. In *Three Rival Versions*, MacIntyre looks at the problem of incommensurability as sociologically real in a way that expresses commonalities between positions. These positions themselves indicate something about a historicised reality; theories are contributors but also are expressions and

---

[20] Ibid., 114.

manifestations of times and places. In an earlier work, *After Virtue*, he also pursues this argument but rather than focusing mainly on the nineteenth century he asks the more basic question: has there always been disagreement about values and is disagreement about values irreconcilable, interminable and ineliminable? That is, is relativism (moral and ethical) extreme and basic to the human condition?

He begins from the argument that modern moral philosophy is situated to the theoretical claims of twentieth-century emotivism. Emotivism argues that there can be no rationally justified basis for a moral or ethical position: no foundational reasoning, and thus no objective morality or naturalised basis to ethics.[21] For the emotivist, to say 'X is good' means no more than 'I approve of X, do X.' Good itself is an indefinable, a non-property in much the way truth is for the deflationist.[22] MacIntyre argues that emotivism gives rise to the concept that values are no more or less than personal opinion. Moreover, as unsupported opinion they can be highly variable, and dogmatically so (this is our unchallengeable position), but also fashionably ephemeral, disposable and superficial. From emotivism flows both strident moral fundamentalism(s) and moral equivocation (which can become a form of amorality and/or uncon-strained ethics of how to live) because the inability for either to be engaged is a fact of the dominance of moral and ethical relativism. That dominance, however, does not reside in any necessary adherence or awareness of emotiv-ism; rather, the rise of emotivism and the failure to adequately address it are manifestations of ways in which societies have incrementally changed. Moral and ethical relativism are sociologically real and one reason for that is the rise of science and reason and the failure of a gradually secularised reason to pro-vide a foundational grounding for values. Each attempt, such as Kant's tran-scendental deduction of, and then from, the categorical imperative has been flawed because each has sought timeless abstract and necessary propositions regarding how one lives.[23] The failure of each such attempt provides the basis for alternative theoretical constructs (such as emotivism) and movements (such as romanticism) and various combinations of constructs and movements (such as existentialism or Kierkegaardian forms of romanticism). The modern socie-ties that have given rise to these constructs and movements are ones that have created new specialisations and more divisions. From these specialisations and

---

[21] MacIntyre, *After*, 7–13.
[22] More generally, addressing the problem follows an argument form that reproduces the problems it tries to evade through the reduction of argument to an actualist form; Searle for example mirrors the Hempelian hypothetico-deductive model. See, J. Morgan, 'Ought and is and the philosophy of global concerns', *Journal of Critical Realism* 4(1) (2005): 186–210. Mac-Intyre makes analogous points in a different way regarding the failure of the search for social laws (*After*, Ch. 8).
[23] Ibid., 43–8.

divisions, and hand-in-hand with the unstable nature of the relation between articulations of reasoned values and each rejection of them, has emerged a social type in the form of the modern manager who claims power and author-ity on the basis of access to value-neutral, law-like expertise utilised in some functional way. For Macintyre, this modern manager and his role is sympto-matic of a basic dislocation of grounded values providing an archetype of a more general individualised moral agent (rooted in modernity) operating and manipulating in bureaucratic structures:

> Contemporary moral experience has a paradoxical character. For each is taught to see himself or herself as an autonomous moral agent; but each of us also becomes engaged by modes of practice, aesthetic or bureaucratic, which involve us in manipulative relationships with others. Seeking to pro-tect the autonomy that we have learned to prize, we aspire ourselves *not* to be manipulated by others; seeking to incarnate our own principles and stand-point in the world of practice, we find no way open to us to do so except by directing towards others those very manipulative modes of relationship which each of us aspires to resist in our own case. The incoherence of our attitudes and our experience arises from the incoherent conceptual scheme which we have inherited.[24]

In its most extreme form this seems a rather bleak vision of the modern condition, analogous to what is termed in management psychology the 'func-tional psychopath': an amoral, manipulative, power-seeking, status-obsessed, unrestrained ego-centric. But MacIntyre's point here is not to place everyone in this category but rather to highlight a key aspect of modern societies and the relation to values. The proliferation of situated values has arisen hand-in-hand with the perpetuation of unstable arguments and claims about each set of val-ues and its relation to the next; this affects not just abstract argument but also human relations. For MacIntyre, differentiated societies are not new, although the degree and nature of differentiation clearly is. What is new and thus a soci-ological product rather than a necessary feature of all forms of value argument in all societies at all times is the lack of any acknowledged unifying basis of difference, some kind of cohering focus from which progressive engagement can begin, and this is the problem for situated objectivity because it constructs itself against the God's-eye view and within the instabilities of engagement with moral and ethical relativism as somehow irreconcilable.

MacIntyre's reconstruction of the problem begins by identifying the loss of coherence as a result of how reason has tried to produce abstract proposi-tions whilst simultaneously losing its rootedness in life *as* lived. For MacIntyre this difference rests on a concept of virtues as hierarchies tied to practices that

---

[24] Ibid., 68.

provide life with a constructed form of telos. Following Aristotle, each virtue – justice, courage, and so on – is a generalised way to orient how one acts (a disposition) whose imperative is excellence in the pursuit of any series of acts in any given milieu. The ongoing doing of that thing is experienced as the realisation of the excellence in doing it well (it is an 'internal good' unrelated to recognition and status), and doing it well may also receive acclaim (the potential external good of status and recognition). To live a fully human life is to experience and express the practice of living well through the pursuit of the internal good of doing. However, whether that thing is 'good' in a more general sense is a reflexive matter of socially engaged debate that cannot simply be reduced to the status that arises from some acts or ownerships or positions:

> The exercise of the virtues is not *a* means to an end [only] of the good for a man. For what constitutes the good for man is a complete human life, lived at its best, and the exercise of the virtues is a necessary part of such a life. We thus cannot characterize the good for man adequately without already having made reference to the virtues … Virtues are dispositions not only to act in particular ways, but also to feel in particular ways. To act virtuously is not, as Kant was later to think, to act against inclination, it is to act from inclination formed by the cultivation of the virtues. Moral education is an education sentimentale … The genuinely moral agent, however, acts on the basis of a true and rational judgement. An Aristotelian theory of the virtues does, therefore, presuppose a crucial distinction between what any particular individual at any particular time takes to be good for him and what is really good for him as a man. It is for the sake of achieving this latter good that we practice the virtues and we do so by making choices about means to achieve that end.[25]

The concept of eudemonia or human flourishing that arises as a consequence of this approach is thus an open and critically engaged one that critical realists will recognise. In terms of what it suggests about situated objectivity, however, the key point is that divided societies are sociologically real but that the arguments associated with them can be different and thus sociologically real division can become sociologically differentiated yet genuinely engaged debate and practice. This is not a call to reproduce Athenian society with all its imperfections. Slavery, gender stereotyping and caste systems of the type found in Plato's *Republic* need not be the goal. Virtues and their goals ought to be understood as reflexive and keyed to historical potential. The point, rather, is to acknowledge that engagement and debate about values is also rooted in how we live and experience and that these are manifestly hampered by some aspects of how we think about them and how we live life in our situations. A first step in addressing those impediments is recognising them. If we are to move forward,

---

[25] Ibid., 149–50.

we must recognise that rational debate about and between values is possible, that all values need not be equal, and that the good, like knowledge generally, cannot be reduced to belief-only. The inflection of situated objectivity as one among many can thus more confidently and consistently include that it is communicative and engaged and that our values involve claims about how we and others live that are corrigible because reference to is also about potential and its link to what we desire. Values are not in addition to objectivity; they are part of the problem field of reflexivity that itself can be objectively addressed. This is because values articulate social reproduction and transformation: they are elements in the (re)actualisation and realisation of ways of living. These are always open to critique in terms of both means and ends, and consequences, and then iteratively in terms of unintended consequence and, in all these senses, in terms of various knowledge claims that place the burden of investigable fact on those values in a way that indicates there is no radical break between facts and values, even if the two can be distinguished in some ways.[26] Andrew Sayer, for example, who draws on MacIntyre, makes much this point:

> A critical analysis of material inequality and symbolic domination cannot evade judgements of the use-value or intrinsic quality of the goods associated with the various kinds of capital, such as the quality or use-value of learning in educational capital. It has to distinguish between deserved and undeserved recognition or misrecognition. Of course, any attempt to make such a distinction is likely to invite suspicion that one is trying to establish an authoritative, indeed authoritarian, basis for judgement, an absolute set of values. However, I fully accept that judgements of (use-)value are contestable. But this does not mean either that all claims to recognition are of equal merit, or disqualified by being associated with particular social positions, or that there must always be some ulterior motive behind the judgements and contestations such that critical distinctions cannot be rationally justified. A 'critical theory' that evades such normative judgements is a contradiction.[27]

Without this starting point the complexity of difference is unable to accommodate the significance of movement between one knowledge claim and another. The movement is no more or less than a description of the forms as historical, as social, as multifarious (since this is the anti-God's eye view addressed through the problem field of extreme moral relativism). But in a curious sense this tells one nothing about the meaning and motive for why any given human may move with them (the historical forms) or between them. Only a sense of the critical subject who is not a subjectification and who is choosing in some way for some reason, including reflexivity about values, can

---

26 See Bhaskar, *Possibility*, Ch. 2, §6.
27 A. Sayer, *The Moral Significance of Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 111.

do that. This is also why, despite being defined in terms of a reading of shifting, postmodernists often prevent a focus on the human and movement. They thereby lose sight of the subject within this process to whom objectivity can have meaning and to whom it can be a choice. Situated objectivity refuses the extremes of moral and ethical relativism but does not quite move on from this and the implications of epistemic privilege (counter-phenomenal claims about the nature of a capitalist society). Sayer, however, is more consistent:

> These arguments jar with the view that what is good and bad is not something that can be judged independently of gender or class, but is relative to them. But it is one thing to acknowledge that our judgements are influenced by gender and class, quite another to regard those influences as carrying some authority (or indeed lacking any worth). The danger of this assumption is that it essentialises gender and class. Gender and class dispositions do not have essences; they do not derive from differences in natural causal powers but depend on the contingent though powerful ways in which individuals are socialised. Nor are they necessarily good: even if those dispositions become deeply ingrained in our habitus, and therefore seem 'authentic', we can critically evaluate and attempt to override them if we wish. To be sure, given our habitus we can hardly help but favour some things over others, but the habitus can be changed, albeit over a long period of time. Feminism has developed a critique of the feminine and masculine habituses, such as the former's self-abnegating tendencies and the latter's disposition towards dominance and this has had some impact in changing men and women.[28]

Sayer's language here moreover, reminds us that if different and located are also engaged and contingent then one can also think about situated objectivity in terms of the way in which different situations and their values can be chains of objectivities whose cohering point may be the Aristotelian virtue that political community can be a common project, particularly if one of the values we choose to foster is precisely the idea that communities should include the facilitation of others flourishing. This then could become a point of focus for debate that can be iteratively objectively addressed.

6. *Conclusion: What is it that one is Choosing when one Chooses Objectivity? Objectivity as a Lever of Freedom*

In choosing objectivity as a value then, one is acknowledging the limits of knowledge in terms of the limits set by the way we seek to know a world that is more than the sum of our claims about it, that includes ourselves within it, that includes ourselves in different localities and times, and is subject to different perspectives and values, as points of departure, but, crucially, commits to the corrigibility of

---

[28] Sayer, *Moral,* 135.

knowledge claims and, of course, recursive aspects of living that function in a more cursory fashion or perhaps from unexamined belief-only. Corrigibility, demands a further commitment to be genuinely engaged with one's interlocutors and genuinely engaged with (and in) research that can make a difference to what one already thinks one knows. Genuinely engaged is a first-step state of mind without which talk of discourse, debate and the way the real world ought to make a difference to what we think and do is mere cant. It is something that cannot be defined in any clear analytical way but is central to the aspirational basis of objectivity and must be constantly renewed. Objectivity, meanwhile, is an expression of that commitment to be genuinely engaged, an expression whose significance arises precisely because of the fallibility of knowledge, of knowledge as an active process, and the world in terms of which knowledge can be both these things. Accordingly, in the sense that it emerges because there is an interface between epistemology and ontology and because both are addressed to a real world (by any other name), it is also a commitment to the search for ongoing consistency in terms of the panoply of means by which knowing is explored: empirical investigation, ontological and epistemological argument, matters of research method and methodology, and so on. These are different domains but should not be separate domains regarding which we are content to be ignorant. It is through the interconnections of these domains that knowledge can become more adequate, can make progress, and also be directed towards progressive societies. Progress and progressive have become dirty words, but what else should knowledge be for: what else should it mean to say that knowledge is active, that we are engaged and that reality is open (which we can claim because of rumination on the subject and the fallibility of knowledge)? If these things are so, then living well, developing human flourishing, is also possible, and is perhaps the highest ideal of knowledge. That it is not is a fundamental contradiction in modern thought. Objectivity, properly understood, orients us on the recovery of thought from this contradiction, and if objectivity is a lever of agency it must then also be a lever of freedom. Roy Bhaskar, for example, has something of this kind in mind in the culmination of *Dialectic*:

> It is time to retotalize the dialectic. Whether one conceives dialectic as argument, change or freedom (and each rationally presupposes the predecessor), the critique of ontological monovalence, that is, of a purely positive account of being, holds the clue. For the point of argument is to absent mistakes, the point of change to absent states of affairs, structures, totalities etc. and the point of freedom to absent constraints, or more generally ills which can always be seen as absences or constraints. Hence we arrive at the real definition of dialectic as the axiology of freedom – or as *absenting absences*, or applied recursively, as *absenting constraints on absenting absences*.[29]

---

[29] R. Bhaskar, *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*, (London: Verso, 1993), 377.

Although aspirational, objectivity is not thereby utopic because it invites us to confront rather than surrender before the complexity of the subject. It is in many respects precisely the opposite of utopian read as mere wishful thinking or fancy because it requires us to think concretely.

Critical realists for example, are committed to explanatory critique as a first move in emancipatory discourse where:

> The empirical establishment of theory T shows belief P about object O to be false (illusory, inadequate, misleading), whose inference is a negative evaluation of the status of in terms of its relations to P and a positive evaluation of action directed at the removal of their relation as a transformation of O.[30]

Where that transformation itself also entails that:[31]

1. Reasons must be causes (co-determined in pre-structured, practical and collective contexts) or discourse, debate and agential decisions are redundant.
2. Values must be immanent in the practices in which we engage or changing norms are irrelevant.
3. Critique must be internal(ised) by relevant subjects or it will lack causal force in 1.
4. There must be coincidence of subjective needs and desires and objective possibilities expressed in 1.
5. Knowable emergent social tendency conditions that can be elaborated must operate or there could be no realisation from 1.

There is a discursive danger, however, in exploring objectivity and its meaning in the way we have done here. It could appear that we are tacitly equating objectivity and critical realism as though objectivity simply meant critical realism. The intent is to explore the meaning of objectivity with reference and illustration from critical realism, not to reduce objectivity to any particular form of critical realism. Objectivity about objectivity requires also that its tenets be applied to critical realism.

In *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*, Bhaskar states:

> The chief methodological problem confronting the social sciences remains that received philosophy of science is at one and the same time *ontologically too restrictive* (inhibiting creative theory, blocking the path to science, the move from manifest phenomena to generative structures) and *epistemologically too permissive* in that, in the absence of relevant explanatory *a posteriori* criteria of theory appraisal and development, it is all too easy for any general

---

[30] R. Bhaskar, *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*, (London: Verso, 1986), 184.
[31] Ibid., 210–11.

> approach (and easier still for a conceptually confused or barren one, once it has become institutionally entrenched) to effectively immunise itself from criticism, making illicit or covert use of *ceteris paribus* or *mutatis mutandis* or *etc.* (holdall) clauses.[32]

A variety of critics have made much of this point about critical realism itself, particularly in economics.[33] One of the major failings that many in the social sciences accuse critical realism of is that its proponents rarely produce empirical research building from the range of ways in which argument is made regarding ontology and epistemology at a generalised level, and this is one way in which it facilitates its immunisation from criticism. There is some credence in this and there is a danger that critical realism will become a convenient conduit for academic careers by enabling a kind of rapid publishing potential typical of social-theory guerrilla-combat techniques where the author seizes and destroys another's equally abstract work in the name of a general reconstruction that never happens. If it does so, however, it is despite its basic tenets, and a growing number of proponents are engaged in more empirical work.[34]

A different avenue of criticism might be that if objectivity is a lever of freedom, for example, it need not necessarily follow that the concept of absence, as phrased in *Dialectic*, pushes our understanding of that lever forward. Absence is a highly ambiguous term, and the notion that flourishing is the absenting of absences read as the removal of ills that constrain us can likewise be curious when applied to values, ethics and moral systems. Debate and insight into how we should live and what we should desire are about realisations and as such about the manifestation of what could be but was not, yet phrasing this as absenting absence is to engage in a semantic that does one thing and does not do another. What the phrasing does do is translate a positive drive into

---

[32] Ibid., 290–91.

[33] See B. Fine, 'Addressing the critical and the real in critical realism', in *Transforming Economics: Perspectives on the Critical Realist Project*, ed. P. Lewis (London: Routledge, 2004). For analysis see, P. Nielsen and J. Morgan, 'Ben Fine on critical realism: from mainstream economics to the boundaries of Marxism', *Capital and Class* 89 (2006): 91–120.

[34] On research method see B. Carter and C. New, eds, *Making Realism Work: Realist Social Theory and Empirical Research* (London: Routledge, 2004). On research design see, B. Danermark, M. Ekstrom, L. Jakobsen and J. Karlsson, *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002). On different applications of critical realism in economics see P. Downward, ed. *Applied Economics and the Critical Realist Critique* (London: Routledge, 2003). For empirical applications based in realist ways of thinking see, W. Olsen and R. V. Ramanamurthy, 'Contract labour and bondage in Andhra Pradesh (India)', *Journal of Social and Political Thought* 1(2) (2000), www.yorku.ca/jspot/2/wkolsenrvramana.htm; W. Olsen, 'Globalisation, liberalisation and a paradox of social exclusion in Sri Lanka', in *Globalisation and Identity: Development and Integration in a Changing World*, ed. A. H. Carling (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006); and J. Morgan, 'The UK pension system: the betrayal by New Labour in its neo-liberal context', *Research on Political Economy* 23 (2006): 301–47.

the language of negations that fits with the immanent critique of Hegelian concepts that *Dialectic* engages in. The broader question is surely whether that translation is a useful one beyond a Hegelian reference point; realising potential is a far less mystifying term than absenting absences, and does not require further elaboration on how some absences are real (the language of potential takes care of that). Furthermore, what the phrasing does not do is develop the complexity of discourses of eudemonia, which are to be cohered in order that the sociological fact of the sense of differentiated values can be addressed through the commonalities that also bind them. Although useful in some ways and in some respects, the concepts of explanatory critique and of freedom as the absenting of ills can also be misleading, especially when decontextualised from the crucial additional caveat that is associated with them that the good is multiply realisable.

Many of the *differentiations* of values are not about facts directly and are not about values as claims rooted in facts that render those values themselves in some sense factual. They are rather about differences of emphasis between rights and duties, individual and collective, positive and negative freedom and different expressions of the good where all parties may acknowledge that each of those expressions entails one good (or ill) among many. They are thus about context dilemmas. They are about how we make imperfect choices and are tightly bound with what different values see as different goods and ills in situations where the consequences of the activity we apply values to can be divisive. Explanatory critique and the absenting of ills as a freeing step make a lot of sense in terms of the problem of material lack (medicines, food, etc.) on an affluent planet when applied to different domains (the role of large pharmaceutical companies, of global trade conditions, etc.). But the situation is more ambiguous when one considers genetic engineering and selection of foetuses; absenting absence as the removal of social ill could easily be deployed as an argument for the creation of a next generation of physically and mentally augmented humans immune to given diseases and impediments in a way that might fulfil a rather literal sense of what it means to flourish. The values debate about whether this should be the case, however, will not be simply one based on what we can do (realise this potential) but in what sense doing so is right. There is no reason why different sets of emphases here could not accord with the same explanatory critique and entail quite different ideas of what we should be realising and why; each could place quite different degrees of worth on what we might be losing by that realisation. This would not render a dialectical sense of freedom as an ongoing process meaningless, nor does it make explanatory critique worthless, but it does indicate that something is missing in a phrasing that makes a direct leap from negative evaluation to transformation via a shift in reasons as causes. What is missing is the fact that none of the

positions may be false in this way; rather, they may be simply different in their emphases of what should be valued and this may make explanatory critique less about falsity and more about laying out the factual links in valuations and their claims to allow a greater focus thereafter on the values as values themselves that can then be further debated. What this means for justifications is an open question. Objectivity may be a lever of freedom but there is no algorithm of freedom. Nonetheless, objectivity is the necessity that need not be. It need not be because it is chosen; it is necessary that it is chosen because it is the choice that opens us out to all other choices.

Bibliography

Archer, M. *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Bhaskar, R. *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*. London: Verso, 1993.

Bhaskar, R. *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1991.

Bhaskar, R. *The Possibility of Naturalism*. Brighton: Harvester, 1979.

Bhaskar, R. *A Realist Theory of Science*. Leeds: Leeds Books, 1975.

Bhaskar, R. *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*. London: Verso, 1986.

Carter, B. and C. New, eds. *Making Realism Work: Realist Social Theory and Empirical Research*. London: Routledge, 2004.

Chomsky, N. *Problems of Knowledge and Freedom*. London: Fontana, 1972.

Danermark, B., M. Ekstrom, L. Jakobsen and J. Karlsson. *Explaining Society: Critical Realism in the Social Sciences*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Derrida, J. *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge, 1978.

Downward, P., ed. *Applied Economics and the Critical Realist Critique*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Fairclough, N. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. London: Routledge, 2003.

Fine, B. 'Addressing the critical and the real in critical realism'. In *Transforming Economics: Perspectives on the Critical Realist Project*, edited by P. Lewis, 202–26. London: Routledge, 2004.

Foucault, M. 'Interview with Gerard Raulet'. *Telos* 55 (1983): 195–211.

Foucault, M. 'What is Enlightenment?'. In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by P. Rabinow, 32–50. New York: Pantheon, 1984.

Giddens, A. *Central Problems in Social Theory*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979.

Giddens, A. *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity, 1987.

Haraway, D. 'Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective'. *Feminist Studies* 14(3) (1988): 575–99. doi:10.2307/3178066

Harding, S. 'Rethinking standpoint epistemology: what is "strong objectivity"?'. In *Feminist Epistemologies*, edited by L. Alcoff and E. Potter, 49–82. London: Routledge, 1993.

Joseph, J. 'Foucault and reality'. *Capital & Class* 82 (2004): 143–67.

King, A. 'The impossibility of naturalism, the antinomies of Bhaskar's naturalism'. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 29(3) 1999: 267–88.

López, J. 'The difference that it makes, in theory'. In *Critical Realism: The Difference it Makes*, edited by J. Cruickshank, 75–89. London: Routledge, 2003.

López, J. *Society and its Metaphors*. London: Continuum, 2003.

MacIntyre, A. *After Virtue*, 2nd edn. London: Duckworth, 1985.

MacIntyre, A. *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. London: Duckworth, 1990.

Montefiore, A. 'Reason and its own self-undoing?'. In *Defending Objectivity*, edited by M. Archer and W. Outhwaite, 213–25. London: Routledge, 2004.

equinoxonline

Morgan, J. 'Ought and is and the philosophy of global concerns'. *Journal of Critical Realism* 4(1) (2005): 186–210. doi:10.1163/1572513053889364

Morgan, J. 'The UK pension system: the betrayal by New Labour in its neo-liberal context'. *Research in Political Economy* 23 (2006): 301–47. doi:10.1016/S0161-7230(06)23009-8

Nielsen, P. and J. Morgan. 'Ben Fine on critical realism: from mainstream economics to the boundaries of Marxism'. *Capital and Class* 89 (2006): 91–120.

Norris, C. *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge, 1991.

Olsen, W. and R. V. Ramanamurthy. 'Contract labour and bondage in Andhra Pradesh (India)'. *Journal of Social and Political Thought* 1(2) (2000), www.yorku.ca/jspot/2/wkolsen-rvramana.htm.

Olsen, W. 'Globalisation, liberalisation and a paradox of social exclusion in Sri Lanka'. In *Globalisation and Identity: Development and Integration in a Changing World*, edited by A.H. Carling, 109–30. London: I. B. Tauris, 2006.

Outhwaite, W. *New Philosophies of Social Science: Realism, Hermeneutics and Critical Theory*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1987.

Pearce F. and A. Woodiwiss. 'Reading Foucault as a realist'. In *After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism*, edited by J. López and G. Potter, 50–69. London: Athlone, 2001.

Rorty, R. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.

Sayer, A. *The Moral Significance of Class*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Sealey, A. and B. Carter. *Applied Linguistics as Social Science*. London: Continuum, 2004.

Shotter, J. *Conversational Realities*. London: Sage, 1993.

equinoxonline