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Robert Isaksen, Frédéric Vandenberghe, Dorothea Elena Schoppek, Leigh Price, Jamie Morgan & Ruth Groff

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DISCUSSION



Roundtable: judgemental rationality in the critical realist project

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ABSTRACT

The article is a lightly edited transcript of a digital roundtable discussion. The participants were invited based on their prior work on critical realism and epistemology. The roundtable discussion includes introductory statements on judgemental rationality by Jamie Morgan, Ruth Groff, Dorothea Schoppek, Leigh Price, and Frédéric Vandenberghe, followed by a discussion between the participants on a variety of topics related to judgemental rationality. The discussion demonstrates a variety of opinions and perspectives, as well as the clashing of opinions in a respectful manner. The roundtable provides interesting discussion points about Bhaskar's approach to judgemental rationality, how we adjudicate between different meta-theories (such as between that of Bhaskar and Harré), and what role should normative values have in theoretical adjudication.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Introduction

The following is a lightly edited transcript of a digital roundtable discussion held on the 28th of June, 2024. The digital meeting was recorded and later transcribed. The transcription was sent to the roundtable participants who made minor adjustments for the sake of greater readability and clarity.

Robert Isaksen

Let me start by describing briefly why I invited you to participate in this roundtable on judgemental rationality.

With Frédéric, as part of my PhD I interviewed a sociology student in Brazil who was working on French pragmatism. And then after the midterm or mid-evaluation, where

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you were a reviewer, you suggested critical realism to him and he changed his entire theoretical structure and moved into critical realism. Fred has also written about ‘Critical realist hermeneutics’ (Vandenberghe 2022) and ‘Towards a critical realist epistemology?’ (Albert et al. 2020) – And I would perhaps have added ‘towards a critical realist *social* epistemology’ when I read your paper. I thought it was very interesting. Of course, your book, *What’s Critical About Critical Realism* (Vandenberghe 2014), has also been important. And I think a particular strength, Frédéric, of yours is that you’ve written in English, French, Portuguese, and I think also Dutch. It’s in quite a lot of different languages.

Frédéric Vandenberghe

Doing my best.

Robert Isaksen

And then Ruth and her cat. I don’t know the cat so well but Ruth, your work has been quite formative for me, especially your section in the *Dictionary of Critical Realism* on theories of truth (Groff 2007). And as it was explained also in Mervyn Hartwig’s entry for the concept of Alethia in the dictionary (Hartwig 2007), how your take on truth was one of the more contentious sections because it was critiquing Bhaskar’s later concept of alethic truth. In your entry you very nicely spell out different theories of truth and what we mean when we talk about the theory of truth, and that was very formative for me during my PhD work. To similar effect was reading all of your comments in the critical realism email list, which is now defunct. I always felt you had a nuanced perspective on things which I appreciated, and almost always agreed with.

Ruth Groff

Well, it’s nice to meet.

Robert Isaksen

Yes, it’s the first time we’ve actually met. And your book, *Critical Realism, Post-Positivism and the Possibility of Knowledge* (Groff 2004) was also important for me. And of course, your work on ontology and causality, for example, *Ontology Revisited – Metaphysics in Social and Political Philosophy* (Groff 2013).

Leigh, you’re one of the first critical realists that I met. I had just finished my Master’s thesis and presented it in South Africa, at the IACR conference there at Rhodes University. And what I’ve written in my notes is that you’ve always been a warm and welcoming person. And I think you’re a good representative of critical realist culture in that sense. Critical realist conferences have always been a hub for really enjoyable, welcoming community. Also in my notes is that you are analytically strong, which is why I think you are doing excellently as the general editor of *Journal of Critical Realism*. And I’ve especially enjoyed your more epistemologically oriented articles. For example, where you’ve looked at questioning what’s understood as science and looked at lay perspectives and how sometimes lay perspectives are better explanations of reality than so-called

science (Burt, James, and Price 2018). Your work on 'Critical realist versus mainstream interdisciplinarity' (Price 2014), and 'Social epistemology and its politically correct words: Avoiding absolutism, relativism, consensualism, and vulgar pragmatism' (Price 2005) was also a very interesting article.

Leigh Price

Thanks, Robert. And I see you went right back into my history there.

Robert Isaksen

And Jamie, we've also been in email contact quite a few years. Your papers with Wendy Olson 'Defining objectivity in realist terms', parts one and two (Morgan and Olsen 2007, 2008) were also very important for me in my PhD thesis, which also goes a long way back. And of course, you have done a lot of work in critical realism and recently the interviews you've done with critical realists. We have interviews with Margaret Archer (Archer and Morgan 2020), Nicholas Rescher (Rescher and Morgan 2020), Doug Porpora (Porpora and Morgan 2020), Tony Lawson (Lawson and Morgan 2021a; 2021b), Alan Norrie (Norrie and Morgan 2021), Bob Jessop (Jessop and Morgan 2022), Dave Elder-Vass (Elder-Vass and Morgan 2022), Andrew Sayer (Sayer and Morgan 2022), Priscilla Alderson (Alderson and Morgan 2023), Ruth Groff (Groff and Morgan 2023), Daniel Little (Little and Morgan 2023), Heikki Patomäki (Patomäki and Morgan 2023a; 2023b), Berth Danermark (Danermark and Morgan 2023), Graham Scambler (Scambler and Morgan 2024), William Outhwaite (Outhwaite and Morgan 2024), and Caroline New (New and Morgan 2024).

And then Dorothea, you're a new person for me to get to know. You contacted me in regards to this special issue, wanting to know when it came out. And I'm just as excited as you are for when it will finally come out. And you have already published a paper in an earlier issue of the *Journal of Critical Realism*, 'How do we research possible roads to alternative futures? Theoretical and methodological considerations' (Schoppek 2021). Your perspective there has been not just on judgmental rationality of what has happened up until now, but on how we can think better futures for our globe, and how we can work towards that. So I am really happy to get to meet you, Dorothea, and happy that you could be here with us.

Dorothea Schoppek

Same here. Thank you very much for the invitation.

Robert Isaksen

So we planned to begin with every participant sharing some initial remarks on judgmental rationality, and then we will move on to a discussion by way of responding to those remarks. I am just happy to be together here with critical realists who have done work on judgmental rationality or objectivity or epistemology, broadly speaking, and to discuss this topic, which is important to me, and I think it should be more important to critical realists than it currently is, which is why I have initiated this special issue. Jamie will be the first to start.

Jamie Morgan

One of the appeals of basic critical realism for social scientists is that it does not require heavy investment in the details and sophistication of philosophy in order to grasp what it can do for you. This is very different than say Kant (and to be clear, Kant's concern is not just about whether if theory A is more adequate than B or if method A is superior to B – he is concerned with the intrinsic cognitive process that we cannot but be engaged in when doing almost anything at all). The below is taken from Robert Hanna's entry on Kant's Theory of Judgment in the *Stanford Encyclopaedia*:

Kant's theory of judgment differs sharply from many other theories of judgment, both traditional and contemporary, in three ways: (1) by taking the innate capacity for judgment to be the central cognitive faculty of the rational human mind, (2) by insisting on the semantic, logical, psychological, epistemic, and practical priority of the propositional content of a judgment, and (3) by systematically embedding judgment within the metaphysics of transcendental-idealism.

(...)

Kant's theory of judgment is at once cognitivist, anti-psychologistic, and anti-platonistic. More precisely, according to Kant, judgments are complex conscious cognitions that (i) refer to objects either directly (via intuitions) or indirectly (via concepts), (ii) include concepts that are predicated either of those objects or of other constituent concepts, (iii) exemplify pure logical concepts and enter into inferences according to pure logical laws, (iv) essentially involve both the following of rules and the application of rules to the objects picked out by intuitions, (v) express true or false propositions (truth-aptness), (vi) mediate the formation of beliefs and other intentional acts, and (vii) are unified and self-conscious. (Hanna 2022)

Anyone who has ever spent time reading Kant for the purposes of getting to grips with his work is aware that you can spend a lifetime doing this and never exhaust the subject (though you might exhaust yourself). CR is not doing this.

Judgemental rationality is intrinsic to the appeal of critical realism but is the aspect that receives least attention or development. Part of the problem is the way critical realism itself has developed in practice. Its intuitive appeal, namely, its acceptability to social scientists, has never required much in the way of explicit substantive discussion of judgemental rationality.

Judgemental rationality follows easily from ontological realism. If one accepts that there is a real world 'independent of what I think about it' you are led straight to the claim that 'the world makes a difference to what I (adequately know, truthfully claim) about it'. Add in the obvious failure of positivism to reflect the way the world is and the world's resistance to just thinking it into being different (as intended) or acting differently (as purposed), and you arrive at judgemental rationality.

So, put simply, ontological realism, plus depth realism, gives an observation of an irregular, contingent changing world about which we can be wrong but only because we can be more or less (with some difficulty) right and more or less effective in how we shape mechanism and events, which leads easily to judgemental rationality (even though a philosopher would state it is not entailed by any of this as an epistemic possibility). In any case, the very ease with which all of the previous can be accepted is a barrier to development of judgemental rationality as its own subject from the point of view of social science.

Most things critical realism goes on to do presuppose judgemental rationality but are rarely posed in terms of it specifically – witness how often you will read doctoral

dissertations on critical realism which follow the standard format: problematization of nature of the discipline as it is, issues that arise, critical realism as a transformative alternative. Implicit to this is that critical realism offers grounds for critique, and a more adequate approach which in turn implies that it is possible to judge one theory as more adequate than another and one method (in context) as more appropriate or effective or insightful than another. Most of this though is achieved at the subject or theory level as the place where warrants or justification operate, and rarely works upwards.

The question then is whether it is desirable and/or necessary that judgemental rationality is fleshed out. Is there much that can be said of judgemental rationality without working outwards from specific materials and cases? If so, is this different by discipline and foci (an odd point to make about whether to start with principles of judgemental rationality)? Is there a difference that makes a difference to judgemental rationality between a situation of non-human worlds (testing and manipulating) and the human world (shaping for purposes of human flourishing)?

This, of course, is a matter that *does* exercise critical realist theorists more urgently.

This last point is that critical realists argue over the nature of critical naturalism – as is – and differentials between how one shapes a thing which is internal to yourself and to society versus the rest of reality as is. To be clear, I did not want to talk about things I knew that Ruth would be able to say much better than me. So I just wanted to make the very simple point that almost nobody who you meet who is just a social scientist, being a social scientist, writes anything about judgmental rationality. It's the least discussed or thought-about aspect of realism when used by most realists you come across.

Robert Isaksen

Excellent. Thank you Jamie. We will continue with Ruth.

Ruth Groff

I think for critical realism, it matters to remind ourselves that that phrase [judgemental rationality] comes in the early work from Roy Bhaskar, and is part of a kind of 'holy' triad of ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgmental rationality. The original thing that I was planning to say was that judgmental rationality, in that context is really just an assertion. And that's that. But I'll say a little bit more.

The ontological realism part [of the triad], we could remind ourselves – as Jamie already flagged – is directed philosophically at a bunch of different targets. It's directed at subjective idealism, the idea that 'There *is* an outside world in a way, but all it is is my thoughts and I generate them, so I generate the world'. Then there's phenomenalism, which is more like: 'The so-called outside world is equal to my perceptions; I don't generate my perceptions, but neither is there something behind my perceptions'. Hume is a good example of that target. And then also, ultimately, I think that Jamie's right: it's directed at Kant, who advanced a much stronger, more sophisticated position. Against Kant, you have to say: 'There is an external world and, moreover, the objects that are in the external world have form all by themselves. They do not need cognition in order to have form'. I think that that's how I would state any realism that's opposed to Kant. Realism of this kind is recognizable as a species of Aristotelianism, for what it's worth.

If we go back to the triad, the ontological realism part is, I think, is an assertion that subjective idealism, phenomenalism, and Kantian transcendental idealism about form are all false, and that a neo-Aristotelian position is true. We have something like this as an anchor established minimally in Bhaskar's *A Realist Theory of Science* (Bhaskar 2003 [1975]), via the argument about what the self-conception of scientific experimentation presupposes. Epistemic relativism is also just a kind of an assertion, akin to an observation. Like: 'We see that, indeed, our best theories have changed over time'. And judgmental rationality, too, is simply an assertion when it's initially presented: 'It's the case that some theories are actually better at tracking that real world that I talked about than others, and it's at least possible to discern which is the better theory at doing that'. Judgmental rationality came along with a warning. Everything had a name in those early works, and in this case it was the 'ontic fallacy' (Bhaskar 2009[1986]). The warning against the 'ontic fallacy' was that we oughtn't think that the reason why it's possible to tell which theory better tracks reality is because you can just read the correct theory off of the ontology. That would be a mistake. Nevertheless, it is the case that some theories track ontologically real phenomena better than other theories do – and, in principle, we can pick out which ones do better and worse. That's the framework.

So what we have are several assertions that aren't super developed – which I think is similar to what Jamie's saying.

As I see it, the judgmental rationality assertion is best understood as being directed at Kuhn and the fallout from Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Kuhn 2012[1962]) had such an impact on the question of scientific development – of whether science progresses, or just changes. Even when I was an undergraduate in the 1980s, the headwinds were that scientific change is arbitrary: we've been seeing the image as faces and then there are enough problems with seeing it as faces that all of a sudden everybody decides it's candlesticks instead, and it's not actually a matter of what Charles Taylor calls epistemic gain (Taylor 1995).

I really think that the idea of judgmental rationality was meant to be an intervention in that environment. There's a lot of language about, 'No, it's not the case that competing theories are incommensurable'. That language is all versus Kuhn. To say: 'We're not in totally different worlds and you just have to pick one. There's enough overlap between paradigms to argue rationally about which is better'. But again, at that point in critical realism it was really just an assertion – along with a warning that it's not so easy as just reading the correct theory off of the ontology. The realism by itself won't give you the answer.

I think that the assertion of judgmental rationality was meant to be descriptive – like: 'No, actually in the sciences, people do have enough common ground to argue, and the development really does represent forward motion' – but also to be a kind of prescriptive or modal claim 'In principle, rational assessment is possible'. I think it works at both levels.

Things I've said about it are in that first book (Groff 2004). I think if you do start to spell it out at a minimum, the issues that come up are (i) 'what do you actually think the concept of truth means?' and then (ii) 'how are you thinking about justification?' So I have a view about that, but I'm not going to shove that into the five minutes I have for this discussion. I think that it's an empirical question, really, whether any given science does progress that way, whether we see that. I'm not sure that political science gets closer and closer to what's true, particularly, but it may be a different story for biochemistry. So I think it's partly an empirical question. But at the philosophical or the kind of

modal question of ‘what’s possible?’, or at the level of principle, I think that’s a different line of argument and there are good philosophical reasons for thinking that it *can* be that inquiry in any area could progress rationally, but I think it’s sort of an empirical question whether it’s more arbitrary or faddish or not.

Robert Isaksen

Thanks, Ruth. That gave me a lot of questions, and I’m sure it did that for others here as well. Dorothea will be the next to share her initial remarks.

Dorothea Schoppek

In my short input on the role of judgemental rationality in the scientific endeavour, I want to focus on questions of epistemic power – a topic that my colleague Corinna Dengler and I are currently working on and that will hopefully lead to a paper – so stay tuned.

Exercising judgemental rationality means to make a judgement about the validity, the truthfulness and/or the adequacy of one body of knowledge in contrast to others. Since knowledge claims can have, and in transformation research, where I specialize in, often do have political effects, such judgements are inherently powerful. Just think of the role the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has in climate politics or The Friday for Future’s demand to listen to the science. Let me give you three examples to illustrate what I am thinking of:

Explaining the climate crisis in terms of wrong investments and wrong decisions regarding the choice of energy source has quite different implications than explaining it in terms of capitalist social relations. The first explanation is compatible with political decisions for greening a growth-oriented economy, while the second is not: instead, it presupposes a deeper engagement with questions of justice.

A second example is the Eurocentricity of knowledge which marginalizes voices from the Global South and indigenous communities whose worldviews are often labelled as irrational and primitive and therefore are not taken seriously in academic debates. In this way, not only political power relations are upheld but alternative ways of addressing the ecological crisis are being precluded.

I would like to give you a third example: so-called future studies engage with possible future developments in different scenarios. They seek to identify likely from possible futures. Unlike in the case of explanatory social science, future studies can have an effect on their object of study. In labelling a future scenario more likely and/or more viable than another, the researcher enlarges or limits the imagination of and the confidence in alternative futures.

All three examples show what Foucault pointed towards when he analysed the interwovenness of knowledge and power (Foucault 1995[1975]). A researcher’s judgement is not only an endeavour in truth seeking, it is also an exercise of power.

A scientific judgment is, of course, subject to different criteria than a political decision. The evaluative criteria must be made transparent, their fulfilment must be intersubjectively comprehensible, and the fallibility of the results must be recognized. However, not only the judgement but also the judges, thus the researchers themselves, are embedded in a scientific community and in scientific discourses that structure their

judgements, thereby suggesting certain theoretical choices or analytical perspectives and excluding others.

Against this background, the researcher has a special responsibility in preventing what the postcolonial thinker Gayatri Spivak (1988) has called 'epistemic violence'. To do so, a rational judgment should be based on a dialogue between different epistemes. This does not mean that we should get lost in relativism but it does mean that we, as researchers, should ask ourselves a question that my colleague Corinna Dengler has raised in a 2022 paper on critical realism, feminism and degrowth: 'who are the judges and in which setting did they develop their judgmental rationality?' (Dengler 2022)

Asking this question means for me to acknowledge one's own situatedness and corresponding shortsightedness and to approach judgemental rationality from a collaborative point of view. It means to become aware of the material consequences of knowledge claims and therefore the ethical dimension of research. Taking epistemological relativism seriously means that researchers have a responsibility to consider marginalized and subaltern bodies of knowledge and to check their own complicity with the reproduction of unjust social relations.

Robert Isaksen

Thank you very much, Dorothea. We will now have Leigh to share her remarks.

Leigh Price

I suspect that much of the fascination with judgemental rationality relates to a misconstrual of the work of Roy Bhaskar. As Nietzsche (1917, 6) pointed out, the battle over philosophy has always been a battle over social power. So, for example, nobody really cares whether someone else believes, or does not believe, that 'cutlery' exists. However, they do care whether all Jews, by definition, are anti-social, or whether all women, by definition, must have two X chromosomes. That is, definitions, and questions of causality, are central both to politics and to judgemental rationality.

It is therefore disconcerting that many critical realists use so-called 'judgemental rationality' to make abstractly universalizing, prescriptive judgements, such as the judgement that trans women are not real women. Bhaskar distinguishes between judgmental rationality and judgementalism. He describes judgementalism as

prescriptively and abstractly universalising and [as] derive[d], at least in part, from the failure to acknowledge the concrete singularity of the dharma (nature, station or position) of the individual, group or situation concerned, and the objectively grounded but specific and possibly unique rationality and morality flowing from it (that dharma). (Bhaskar 2002, 21–22)

Judgemental rationality interpreted as judgementalism results in people's 'dozy bask in the retrojected glories of earlier objectifications of thoughts misconstrued as natural givens' (Bhaskar 2008[1993], 194). As we have learnt from Wittgenstein (1957[1953]), there is nothing naturally given about our objectifications of thought, and I think this relates to what Ruth was saying, that we can't just look at what's real and immediately get knowledge from that. So that means we actually can choose to change our definition

of what it means to be, for example, a woman, if the current definition has turned out to be, if not wrong, then at least incomplete.

However, to think more in terms of philosophy, to understand judgemental rationality, one must first understand the problem of induction because it is Bhaskar's resolution of this problem that leads to his need for judgemental rationality. Karl Popper attempts to deal with the problem of induction by shifting the focus of scientific inquiry from proving generals to falsifying them. Nevertheless, for Popper, **constant conjunctions of events are both necessary and sufficient** to justify generalizable knowledge, even though he also admits that such knowledge is fallible, in that it can never be completely proven, only disproved.

And then we have Rom Harré who appreciates Popper's critique of induction and his emphasis on falsification, but he also critiques Popper's deductivism because it 'limited all ideas to the kinds of ideas between which simple deductive relations hold (leading to a neglect of the vital roles played by other kinds of ideas in scientific thinking)' (Bhaskar, Danermark, and Price 2018, 90). Therefore, for Harré (1970, x, 26) there is a natural necessity, arrived at via a process of what critical realists would call retroduction, that explains why we have only seen white (or black) swans, namely the genetic makeup of swans. Therefore, if we compare Popper and Harré, Popper assumes that constant conjunctions of events are both necessary and sufficient for scientific knowledge, but Harré assumes that **constant conjunctions of events are necessary, but they are not sufficient** (they are not the only kinds of ideas in scientific thinking).

Whereas Harré's (1970) solution is an epistemological one, based on a stratification of science, Bhaskar's solution is an ontological one, based on the stratification of reality. This focus on ontology allows Bhaskar to realize that, because most of what goes on in the world happens in an open system, there is good reason to believe that there can, and indeed usually is, a mismatch between what is happening at the ontological level of structures and mechanisms, and what we see happening at the level of the empirical. Therefore we cannot be certain that, for instance, global warming is not happening simply because of a hiatus in the warming (a hiatus that can be explained because of the open system of the world, in which the global warming of the greenhouse effect may be mitigated by extra dust in the air due to extra volcanic activity that reflects the sun's light away from the earth). Thus, unlike both Popper (1956 [1934]) and Harré (1970), Bhaskar (2003[1975]) assumes that **constant conjunctions of events are not only not sufficient, but in fact they are not even necessary.**

This is an elegant resolution of the problem of induction, but it leaves scientists with a quandary, since, if we cannot decide what is real by constant conjunctions of events, then what can we decide it by? This is where Bhaskar steps in with his concept of judgemental rationality, as an important component of his scientific method. Like the anti-deductivists, Bhaskar values the importance of retroductive theorisations or models to explain the empirical evidence, but unlike them he assumes that we cannot test the validity of our theories by seeking formal tests of validation that involve constant conjunctions of events. Bhaskar argues that we achieve validation instead by judgemental rationality. Formally, the process of judgemental rationality embraces what Bhaskar calls Popper's moment of falsification, and this occurs twice in Bhaskar's DREIC version of science. First, falsification or judgemental rationality occurs at the point of **E**limination (the theory that cannot account for all of the evidence is falsified) and later it occurs at the

point of **Correction** (the original version of the theory is falsified and must be corrected) (Bhaskar 2008[1993], 109).

To conclude, there are two important considerations in understanding the concept of judgemental rationality, first, in terms of its role as legitimizing certain claims to knowledge, and second in terms of its resolution of the problem of induction. Finally, it is important not to confuse judgemental rationality with judgementalism.

Robert Isaksen

Thank you Leigh, I am really enjoying these insights. And we have Frédéric next.

Frédéric Vandenberghe

I think the 'Holy Trinity' forms a coherent system. On the intransitive dimension, we have the realist ontology with its search for depth and for generative mechanisms. The epistemic relativism is situated in the transitive dimension. And yes, we don't have direct access to the world. So then, of course, that's when the third moment comes in of judgmental rationality which is, as you, Robert, phrased nicely, is a question of 'rational theory choice', a rational adjudication between rival theories, as opposed to judgmental relativism, in which knowledge is completely internal to one paradigm. In your text (Isaksen 2016), you also introduce greater explanatory power as the decisive criterion.

I would agree with that for the natural sciences. But when we move to the social sciences, I think it's extremely problematic. It presupposes that the primary task of science is causal explanation. And I must say, I'm no longer sure about that.

The critique of positivism remains important. But there's a risk that critical realism when it is imported in current debates turns into a substitute for positivism and scientism. I discovered that when I was working with the critical realism network in the United States. And I think that that insistence on explanation is what is killing off or, more dramatically, what already killed off social theory.

So I think that we need to have a much more pluralist conception where, on an even keel, we need to do description, explanation, interpretation, and judgment. And judgment is essential. It's the normative element which we cannot avoid in the social sciences.

Of course, the social sciences are multidisciplinary. We're talking about many disciplines here. I'm speaking from sociology, a little bit from anthropology as well. Dorothea is coming from international relations. So how are we going to agree?

The other issue is multi-paradigmatism. Within the social sciences, it is absolutely the rule. And it's good. I would say I have only two enemies in the field: basically, positivism when it comes to the natural sciences, and utilitarianism when it comes to the social sciences.

But even if we use your path, your criterion of depth and explanatory power, even then, I don't think that we get out of the conundrum. Because if it is all about relating the part to the whole, as you say, yes of course, we can do it via a retroduction and then explanation by bringing in generative mechanisms. But if you seek to align the social sciences with the humanities, as I want to do, actually shifting to a certain extent critical realism into a more idealist direction, then I would say in a more hermeneutic approach, a critical hermeneutics, we also have to rethink connection between the part

and the whole, which is exactly what the ‘documentary method’ (Mannheim 1952) is doing.

If you’re working within a more structuralist or post-structuralist tradition, you have the same issue with discourse. It’s always the connection that matters. And yes, of course, we need depth, but we need it for normative and for political reasons, because we need to make the connection between what I call ‘degenerative mechanisms’, which are basically those systems of oppression which Bhaskar theorized under the heading of ‘generalized master-slave relations’, and see how they impinge on cultural issues and on agency.

I must say, I have always understood the question of judgmental rationality from the point of view of Habermas’ discourse theory. I always assumed that the criterion is basically the criterion of a consensual theory of truth, provided, of course, that we make a realist correction to Habermas (Vandenbergh 2019). And here I’m thinking especially of his *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Habermas (1968) 2015), where the rational consensus of the unlimited community of communication, I conceive, is basically a counterfactual consensus of an enlarged community that is real but not actual, and perhaps not empirical (at least if we see what’s going on in the elections here in Europe, but that’s another issue).

Anyway, my point would be that this space for a realist exploration of transcendental hermeneutics is where the realist correction comes in. In Habermas, the referential dimension of truth is missing. That’s where ontological realism comes in. Then you have the openness with the epistemic relativism, and the judgmental rationalism comes in to temper the relativism.

And so I would say, in this correction, it is not because the scientists arrive at the consensus that we can presume that they have arrived at the truth. It is rather the reverse, I would say with Bhaskar, it is because all evidence points to the truth that the scientists arrive at a consensus.

Robert Isaksen

Thank you very much, Frédéric. That would conclude the first part of our roundtable, and we can now respond more directly to each other’s remarks. If anyone has any question to ask somebody, maybe that could be a good start.

Ruth Groff

Well, I don’t know if it’s exactly a question, but I think I disagree with you Leigh, on how you parsed the Harré-and-Madden to Bhaskar move. I would say that it’s curious, actually. Harré and Madden gave their book *Causal Powers* the subtitle of ‘*Theory of Natural Necessity*’ (1975). In that work, at least, they were going after Humean regularity theory. And they did give an ontological response to it: namely, ‘The necessity of laws is grounded not in perceived constant conjunction plus expectation, but rather in the nature of things. It’s because things **are** a given way, that they act the same all the time’. It’s really important to then see the nuance in the context of that line of argument of Bhaskar’s *A Realist Theory of Science* (RTS) (Bhaskar 2003[1975]). RTS isn’t just a different swing at the issue. Bhaskar, too, says that there isn’t a real problem of induction: if we know correctly what a thing is like, then we know what it’s going to do, and it’s going to do that

next time also. But the problem that Bhaskar starts RTS with, vis-a-vis Harré and Madden, is that **notwithstanding** the fact, if we've established it, that there are kinds of things and that they behave accordingly (so we don't have to worry about induction in the way that Hume does) – notwithstanding that fact, it really is the case that the regularities can be disrupted.

Harré and Madden were just interested in properly grounding the regularities, whereas Bhaskar comes in and says that actually the regularities might **not** hold, and yet we **still** don't want to say that the laws don't hold! And the solution to that conundrum isn't judgmental rationality. The solution to that, in RTS, is the transfactual nature of powers. Yes, kinds of things have given kinds of powers, so we don't have to worry that they're suddenly going to do different stuff, but the manifestations or expressions of those powers may well not go through. So we want to attach laws to the underlying necessary **tendency** of the thing.

It's funny because Bhaskar allows for more disruption of the regularity. Again, that's precisely the thing that's vexing him in RTS: 'Well, okay, we've established that there's a basis for this necessity, and yet we don't always see the regularity. How can we have both things going on?' I think Harré and Madden deserve more credit for having an ontological solution to the problem of necessity (and the related epistemological problem of induction). It's just that they don't take on the question of 'What about when we want the necessity but we don't have the manifest regularity – the superficial manifestation of the necessity. How do we explain **that?**' And I think that's what Bhaskar was trying to do in RTS, or *one* of the things.

Leigh Price

Yes, I can agree with you. Well, I've read Harré more than Madden, and I'm thinking of his example of a flush of blue jackets (1970, 26–27): the fact that we can explain the existence of a flush of people wearing blue jackets walking down the street if we've got a nearby Air Force base or whatever. So that certainly is very ontological for me. So I agree that there's a sense of the ontology there.

But I think what Bhaskar is trying to get at is how this division of science into two different layers doesn't quite extend into their ontology. It is the extension of that idea to ontology that allows Bhaskar to say that something's happening at this level of ontology and it's not being expressed at this other level [as a regularity].

We could perhaps say that Harré and Madden have an ontology, but it is not the same ontology as Bhaskar's. Maybe we could say that. So they have an ontology, but they do not necessarily have this ontology that allows them to say, 'this part of the world has these trends and powers going on, and this part of the world, the empirical, isn't reflecting that yet'. Maybe.

Jamie Morgan

It strikes me that the significant point to make about the work of Harré isn't necessarily about the causal powers thing. In the end, the argument's differences there are, I would suggest, minor. It's the fact that Harré spends a lot of time thinking about the discrimination between theories in his work on modelling, on iconic modelling in particular,

which Bhaskar borrowed slightly for about five minutes in *A Realist Theory of Science* and then never really did a lot with. So, I mean, there is a whole body of Harré's work which is about the discrimination between theories based on the different way in which you model appropriate to the process of modelling for particular purposes. He's got an awful lot of material on this.

In terms of judgmental rationality, the pressure point of argument is not so much the things we all agree about, which is the fact that there's a mind-independent world, and different aspects of that world, such as bits of it we live in for the purpose of how we live, and get choice over, and the bits of it which are processes that pre-exist us and are also not dependent on us. It's rather the bits about which we make discriminations in terms of both those things, and also the things that matter to us in terms of how we live in the world. And those are things which I think Harré has quite different things to say about than Bhaskar, because he's not interested in issues like emancipatory politics or any of those kind of things. That's just not where he goes in his life in terms of how he develops theory, is it? So, I mean, I would just suggest that that's where the weight of that argument possibly lies more interestingly.

Frédéric Vandenberghe

Yes, let's think about the adjudication, rational adjudication between Harré and Bhaskar. I remember when way back I read his trilogy *Ways of Being: Physical Being* (Harré 1991), *Social Being* (Harré 1979) and *Personal Being* (Harré 1984).

Bhaskar and Harré do not differ in their philosophy of science. The difference is situated in their view of the social sciences. Unlike Bhaskar, Harré did not consider social structures as real entities. In the social sciences, he was kind of more of a nominalist. He wasn't able to take into account a properly stratified reality with its emergent powers. He stayed with an ontology which was made for social psychology, which is kind of fine. But exactly then, when we start comparing, and adjudicating, we can say this his theory failed. Because it did not take into account the generative and degenerative structures and the necessity to uncover how they work in order to link them back to the practices. He was not into social transformation. He was definitely not a revolutionary. I'm not even sure if he was critical. But isn't that how we evaluate theories?

When you look at Habermas, when you look at Bourdieu, when you look at a Foucault, yes, of course, we do agree that we need a little realist correction. But at the end of the day, I think we kind of share the same project to a certain extent. And what is the project? Why are we doing social sciences? Are we just doing it because we want to explain things? No, we want 'to explain more to understand better', as Ricoeur once said. That's how we get into the transformative loop. And this is exactly the point that Rom Harré didn't take into account. For social psychology it's absolutely fine but for political reasons and for normative reasons, from a Bhaskarian and from a more critical point of view his theory was insufficient.

Robert Isaksen

It's precisely this topic that interests me so much, being in a world where there are so many different perspectives and value systems and ideas on which criteria we should

use to choose. And it's getting into the nitty-gritty of the criteria that I find particular value in, in critical realists delving into judgmental rationality, and understanding, reflecting on, and potentially critiquing criteria.

Jamie Morgan

If we need an operationalized judgemental rationality anywhere, it is surely in terms of futures.

I'm curious what people think about Bhaskar's later work on the nature of tense and time, and the way in which causal mechanisms work through time and shape possible futures, because surely in terms of the place where having some principles of judgmental rationality matter more than most, it has to be that one. Once you've denied positivism and the possibility of prediction based on that way of viewing the world, we still need some way of rationally deciding how we approach a future which we're actually actively creating all of the time through processes which work temporarily over different kind of durations.

We don't just discover the future. We're continually making it over periods of time through what we do, climate change being the obvious and urgent version of that now. I mean, in what sense does judgmental rationality apply to that? Is it purely just about cases in science or is there something that can be said philosophically about this?

Dorothea Schoppek

I just think that one of the really interesting major differences is that in explanatory cases, you have something that has happened and you don't have any effect or influence with your research on it. And in the cases of future science or future studies, it's as you said, Jamie, you're making the future, you're not only researching it (see also Patomäki 2006; 2023). And I think it is important to differentiate between short-term analyses of the future and long-term scenarios, because I would say we can identify some tendencies of structures that are very likely, if I'm allowed to say 'likely' in a critical realist context, to also actualize in the future.

But I think we should also be aware of our agential freedom to change things and that unexpected events might happen or people might change in a way that these structures will no longer continue to exist in the future. So I think as critical realists we can't really say things about the future that is very far away.

But, and if I may ask another question to you Jamie, because you've made this comment in text, where you've said, 'fleshing out what judgemental rationalism is need not be the same as operationalizing it in some adverse sense of power and knowledge'. Maybe you could explicate a little bit on that because I'm here very interested. Thank you.

Jamie Morgan

It was posed as a question. Clearly, from the point of view of philosophy, you can do many different things, can't you? You can have a discussion of what we mean by a term and what it means in the world in relation to other things. Or you can apply

yourself to making that something which has particular applications in the world. An adequate account of judgmental rationality may include saying that in and of itself, it cannot help you do anything in particular, as you require operationalization in terms of X, Y and Z, which are not themselves judgmental rationality at some abstract level.

So it's more of a question, how far do we think you can say something about judgmental rationality, which is in and of itself the same as or different than operationalization of judgmental rationality?

Frédéric Vandenberghe

Okay. Going back to your question, which is also my question, how do we adjudicate between different social theories? That is a difficult question. One of the things I've learned is that there's something like a 'theoretical logic in sociology' (Alexander 1982-1983).

If you're a sociologist, you always go back to the classics. You know you have to combine them. You cannot build your theory just on Marx or just on Durkheim or just on Weber. You need each of them to interconnect one way or another the structures, the cultures, and the practices, or if you want, the generative mechanisms of the social structure, the cultural structures, which basically are worldviews that disclose the world, and then the practices.

This is very important when we are thinking about the future. Because, of course, we need to point to the structures of domination that impede, that block transformative praxis. Precisely because we want to change the world, worldviews are absolutely essential. And the capacity to act on the basis of ideas, ideals and so on is also essential. A critical theory cannot afford to ignore this idealist aspect of transformative practice.

And how do we judge theories? Well, I think, among other things, we do that in terms of intellectual craftsmanship. I mean, how do you actually make your articulations and why do you make them? And here I would venture that this is in fact a criterion that we use. Yes, as critical theorists and also as critical realists, we bring in normative issues. Just recently, I reread *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* by Christian Smith (2014). Of course, he dismisses it, whereas I fully endorse it. The project of the social sciences is maybe not a spiritual project, as he claims; it certainly is a moral project and a political project. Isn't that also what has attracted us to critical realism? Bhaskar always supported critical theory and always supported transformative politics. And we use those criteria as well when we judge. And on the basis of this identification we do our articulations. That, I think, is what we do. And that is how we judge between one theory and another.

Ruth Groff

I want to react to your previous comments, Frédéric, but maybe generally too. I think this is very tricky. I absolutely agree that social science is value-inflected, value-saturated, value-laden. I think that you can take any given social theory and, as a philosophical operation, identify what the implicit normative commitments are – as well as what the other implicit philosophical, metaphysical commitments are. I think that that's all true. It's tricky and interesting, the way in which social scientific theories are value-infused.

Frédéric, you presented Harré's work in terms of the ontology of social structures, and I would agree with you on that. But then you went on to say that what Harré says may be true when it comes to social psychology, but that some other theory is going to be true if you want to transform the world. I think that that's a slippery slope, and is not the best way to think about the issue. That is, one option is to say, 'Well, my political objectives are X, and therefore I think *this* is true'. I think that's a mistake. I think the better way to implement judgmental rationality in this very case, for instance, is an approach that Charles Taylor talks a bit about, and in the more hermeneutic tradition lots of people talk about (and Bhaskar too, in his idea of the explanatory critique), which is to say, 'Look, I can tell you the object domain in relation to which your claims are empirically adequate, but there's a broader context in which they fall short. I've got the better theory because I can explain more than you can explain. I can show that your account only describes the way certain groups of people act, and it doesn't, as satisfactorily as my theory does, explain the underlying structures that generate the behaviour in the first place'. In this way, you lay claim to a theory that explains more and better and precisely shows the limitation. It's also a Hegelian sort of move. When Marx says in *Theses on Feuerbach* that 'the point isn't just to explain or describe the world, but to change the world' (Marx 2020[1888], 1986), I think that we have to be very careful not to take that to be a Nietzschean move of, 'In the end, you just pick which theory is true based on how you want things to be or based on what you think is good'.

If you decide against that Nietzschean move, you can't fall into saying 'Your theory is true if your politics are this, my theory is true if my politics are that, and because I care about flourishing, here's my science'. I think that that's really **not** the way to handle the necessarily interested character of both natural scientific inquiry and social scientific inquiry.

What we should say to Harré is: 'This is limited. We can sublate it. We've got the broader theory that explains your theory and the limitations of your theory and the generation of your theory. And those are good grounds for thinking that we've got the better theory'. We can leave out of it whether it's good for our revolutionary purposes.

Leigh Price

Ruth, I really liked the way you just described judgmental rationality as that process of encompassing more of reality. I thought that was brilliant, and it's about sublation as well, it's often a bit of a sublative process. So I really like that.

And Frédéric, just quickly to say, I would have to agree to disagree with you about how you frame judgmental rationality as sort of Habermasian but with reality coming in. We don't have time to go into that, but I think I disagree with it.

Frédéric Vandenberghe

I actually agree with you, Ruth. I'm just saying that when we are doing social theory, and precisely because we are concerned about the human condition, we need not only epistemic, but also normative criteria. That is obvious. And when I'm speaking about a complete social theory, I mean that we need to be able to point to generative mechanisms, to social structures, cultures, and so on. Whether we do that then with Bhaskar or with

Bourdieu or whomever, doesn't matter that much. What matters is the quality of your conceptual articulations. There's an internal logic of argumentation, some kind of know-how you acquire with the trade, that says that if you have structure, you also need a very, very powerful theory of culture and of cultural powers. I don't come from an Anglo-Saxon tradition, I have more of a continental background in philosophy. So I don't latch on to Wittgenstein to think through culture and practice. I think you can do that. Bourdieu did it. So did Giddens and Bhaskar. That is not a problem. I come from the hermeneutic tradition. And so I articulate structure, culture and agency differently. I think that the cultural element in critical realism is not strong enough.

And when it comes to practices, that's where pragmatism is actually very, very good because it has this transformative aspect. So you can do your articulation between those theories. When I said there's some craftsmanship, some tacit knowledge we use to adjudicate between theories, I do not only refer to the epistemic level. There are other dimensions of knowledge that are as important: the normative level, the transformative level, the political level and ultimately also the ground level of philosophical anthropology. Those are the criteria that we are using when we evaluate a theory. Don't get me wrong. I'm not an old-fashioned Marxist who basically thinks that at the end of the day, it's the position of the proletariat that decides about the truth. So I think we do agree on this point.

In the social sciences, values are crucial. Why don't we like a rational choice theory? Is it because of its models? Is it just because it is reductive? Or is it because of its political stance? I would say it's all of it. And why are we going to attack it? I think we are going to attack it for all kinds of reasons, but at the end of the day, it is because it's not our philosophical anthropology. It's not a theory that helps us to think about human flourishing.

Ruth Groff

It's funny because my initial reaction was, 'because it's not true'. It's like, it might be bad, but it's bad because it's not true.

Jamie Morgan

The 'truth' for how to live is not up to theorists.

Robert Isaksen

And then I'll give the final word here to Dorothea.

Dorothea Schoppek

Oh, what an honour. I just wanted to raise another question, but maybe we can take it home and think about it. Because I still feel very uncomfortable with the criteria of greater explanatory power. I think that's something that's in the debate a lot. And for me, it still raises the question, or I still think that it just shifts the problem of the criteria. When I ask myself, okay, which criteria should I choose to decide in favour of this or that theory? And then someone tells me, to choose whichever theory has the greater

explanatory power. It comes to my mind, who decides what is a better and a more comprehensive explanation? So for me, it's only a shift of problem and not an answer. I'm really interested in your thoughts on that.

Leigh Price

I'm not going to give a full answer, but I'm just going to say, Dorothea, looking up Roy Bhaskar's concept of the 'object/ive' might be helpful. So that object/ive already has values in it. And I think that's how he avoids that problem. So our criteria are based on our object, which is also our objective. What do we want to do with that? Why do we ask the question in the first place? And that's where you get different criteria coming in, depending on your objective. But it's not a pragmatic objective in the way the pragmatists construct it.

Robert Isaksen

I can just add finally to that, in the article I've written that will be published in the special issue I look at the criteria that Bhaskar presented, and he mentions 'significance' in four different ways in the criteria. And the question is always significant to whom? If you come from different paradigms, what is considered significant will differ. So I tried to deal with that a bit in the paper.

Finally, I just want to say, I really, really enjoyed this. And this was exactly kind of what I was hoping for: getting together with critical realists, working out philosophical questions. It's not often that I get to do that. We had some discussion, some reflection, some suggestions for answers, but most importantly, I think, raised further questions. So I just want to thank you all for taking the time to join this roundtable discussion.

Jamie Morgan (note added from later email correspondence)

There are numerous issues we didn't get round to discussing in any detail; not only does judgemental rationality bear on futures studies insofar as this invokes issues regarding how futures are anticipated and shaped through processes, but it also bears on ethical naturalism/moral realism via notions of human flourishing. The works of Mary Midgeley, Elizabeth Anscombe, Philippa Foot and Iris Murdoch are particularly relevant here on why different moral positions don't amount to some equivalent of 'this is just what we do around here and others do it differently someplace else' or 'hurray for us, boo to fascists' or some such thing. Andrew Sayer, Dave Elder-Vass and Steve Ash have, for example, all written interesting things on these subjects.

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