

The Principles of Critical Realism and its Value to Human Psychology and Psychotherapy

Critical realism as developed in Britain by Roy Bhaskar (Bhaskar, 2015, 2016, 2017) and comprehensively discussed by Collier (1994), takes an approach to philosophy that seems particularly consistent with the complexity of human psychological phenomena. This chapter will provide an overview of core characteristics of Bhaskar's critical realism, and argue for its value as an appropriate philosophy to support our search for knowledge in relation to psychotherapy and its practice.

Critical realism in general is a philosophy that believes the phenomena in the world around us have an absolute reality, which is independent of our knowledge of them and of our thoughts about them, and recognizes that there can be problems and limits in our human capacity to gain knowledge of them (Flew, 1984). British philosopher Roy Bhaskar has developed a particularly discerning version of critical realism that addresses complex issues involved in the study of both the natural and human, psychological and social worlds.

Bhaskar's critical realism is seen by Collier (1994) as existing in the space between relativism and idealism on the one hand, which both deny the absolute reality of the material world, and logical positivism on the other, which believes in that reality, sets very narrow limits on what can be known and always assumes direct correspondence between what can be observed and what actually exists. Critical realism accepts the value of reason and logic, and is fully committed to a thorough, objective and discerning approach to the study of the natural and human social worlds (Collier, 1994; Hartwig, 2007).

The following brief summary of core principles within Bhaskar's critical realism is advised by Andrew Collier's book *Critical Realism. An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy* (Collier, 1994), Roy Bhaskar's transcribed lectures *The Order of Natural Necessity: A Kind of Introduction to Critical Realism*, edited by Gary

Hawke (Bhaskar, 2017), and the *Dictionary of Critical Realism* (Hartwig, 2007).

Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realism

Core principles:

- *Realism and objectivity:* The material world in all its forms has an absolute reality, and exists independently of our knowledge of it, our thoughts about it and the scientific methods that we use to study it. It can exist and be real even if we are not able to observe it at all.
- *Fallibility:* All theories and the data that have led to them are fallible, and may subsequently be shown to be wrong, and the scientific beliefs of any given time may prove to be mistaken. The nature of every subject of study will go beyond the data that we are able to observe.
- *The transitive nature of theories in relation to the intransitive absolute reality of the ontological world:* Scientific theories represent our current best approximations to truths about ourselves and the world around us. They are transitive objects, always in transition towards a potential full and accurate knowledge of intransitive absolute reality, a reality that we may never actually come to know. The intransitive world exists independent of our knowledge about it, and involves the entirety of existence, being or ontology of ourselves and the world around us.
- *Transphenomenality:* An object of study may have both an observable surface structure and an underlying deeper structure which is not directly observable. It may be possible to investigate and gain knowledge of underlying structures. These structures may also be more enduring than the observable characteristics of surface indicators, which they may be responsible for creating.
- *Counterphenomenality:* The knowledge that may be gained about deeper structures may contradict and not appear to be consistent with the knowledge that has been gained about the surface structure of the same object of study.

Critical realism sees our knowledge as transitive, continually moving forward towards a better picture of entities as they exist in their intransitive state. In some instances we may be able to come to a full and accurate knowledge of the intransitive object, in others we may never be able to do so. It also recognizes the full importance of the entire world around us, our total existence, whether the entities within that world can be subject to scientific study or not, all of the ontology or 'being' of our world matters, and has an absolute intransitive nature of being, at any one time.

Fundamentally, it puts human beings in a relatively unknowing place, it

recognizes the fallibility of our capacities to perceive and conceptualize, as well as the value and benefits of our current best approximations to the truth about the world. In this respect it clearly rejects the foundationalist certainty of epistemologies such as logical positivism. It does not accept that all theoretical beliefs are equally valid as judgmental relativism does, but does believe that they are socially produced, transient and fallible. These core characteristics of critical realism lead it to be seen as a depth realism in contrast to the shallow realism or actualism of empiricism and especially logical positivism, which denies the existence of underlying structure and sees automatic direct and infallible equivalence between what is observed and what exists in absolute reality.

In addition to these core characteristics of critical realism, Bhaskar has given particular attention to the prevalence of complex open systems in nature, the value of imaginative models within science, and the dialectical relationship between different epistemologies. Each of these themes will be discussed before turning our attention to the value of critical realism in relation to human psychology and psychotherapy.

The recognition of natural open systems: Critical realism asserts that natural systems always exist as open multi-interactional systems. Collier (1994) discusses the ways in which the unnatural experimental creation of a closed system may distort the functioning of phenomena and generative mechanisms and possibly lead to misleading results.

This position leads to the conclusion that the capacity of a generative mechanism to produce a particular outcome within an experimental closed system should be referred to as a tendency. This is an important position to hold, since it accepts that the generative mechanism under study can produce the outcome that has been observed in the closed experimental system; however, it also recognizes that in a natural complex open system the situation may be different. The generative mechanism under study may produce the outcome that it has a tendency to produce, or it may produce a different outcome depending on the functioning of the other generative mechanisms it is interacting with as part of that system. It will not necessarily always be triggered and the observable outcome of it being triggered may not always be exactly the same. Empirical evidence has demonstrated that generative mechanisms function in unpredictable ways in complex open systems, and Collier (1994) sees this as an empirical truth as much as any other.

Crucially, the principles of critical realism challenge the expectation that the practice of science will necessarily lead to prediction and certainty. Collier (1994) specifically argues that sciences which address mechanisms that only function in complex open systems can achieve high explanatory power without making predictions, and that the inability to make predictions should not be seen as a failure. He supports the mutual value of studying both closed and open systems.

Unnatural experimental closed systems can valuably demonstrate the existence of generative mechanisms and explore their possible tendencies, which may then be looked for at work in natural open systems.

Unobservable phenomena and the value of imaginative models: The belief in the transitive nature of human knowledge, and the concepts of both transphenomenality and counterphenomenality within critical realism provide a secure epistemological home for the value of imaginative models of understanding. The existence of both observable phenomena and the underlying unobservable entities that influence them is a clearly accepted reality within critical realism.

Collier (1994) sees imaginative constructions as helping to make unobservable entities clearer to us, and as supporting us in making predictions about how those entities or phenomena might behave. We are then able to investigate the potentially observable consequences of their functioning, although they themselves cannot be directly investigated because they are not that kind of a thing. As transitive knowledge develops over time, what were previously proposed as imaginative models, may be discovered to exist as real structures underlying those phenomena.

A dialectical philosophy: A core characteristic of Bhaskar's critical realism has been defined as its dialectical nature, and at times it has been referred to as dialectical realism (Collier, 1994). Since the way the term dialectic is used within philosophy may vary, it may be helpful to start by clarifying its meaning. Flew (1984) refers to Hegel's classical use of the term, using it to describe the logical pattern that productive and creative thought processes need to follow. Ideas need to be brought together that have been judged to be contradictory to each other, sometimes referred to as thesis and antithesis. These two will often be kept separate because they have been assumed to be incommensurable and cannot be brought together. However, progress is made from a dialectical perspective if contradictions can be resolved in some creative way and a synthesis achieved that moves both thesis and antithesis to different positions. It is this process that Hegel defines as dialectic.

In this context the nature of incommensurability becomes quite crucial. Collier (1994) gives particular attention to this issue, and points out that thesis and antithesis always have something in common because they represent different transitive knowledge about the same intransitive phenomenon. Two theories cannot clash with each other if they have no shared meanings; they can only clash about something. As an example, Collier reminds us of Lavoisier and Priestly whose theories clashed about the gas that one called oxygen and the other called de-phlogisticated air. This something is the start of a possible dialectic process, in which apparently incommensurable theories may learn from and support each other, moving in new dialectically integrative directions.

The dialectical approach within critical realism would look at what apparently

incommensurable theories have in common as well as recognising their differences. It would also seek to examine those differences and consider ways in which they might be resolved, potentially prompting creative dialectical thinking.

As with Priestley and Lavoisier different scientific communities may see no overlap of sense in their differing theories, and may be unaware that they are actually referring to the same intransitive thing. Connections and degrees of potential synthesis may be possible across a range of different epistemologies and associated theoretical positions. Critical realism's support for the mutual relevance of a range of epistemologies and its belief in the potential for dialectic synthesis between apparently incommensurable positions sits at the heart of its relevance to theoretical integration.

Critical realism also takes the position that we can apply reason and logic to choose the aspects of theories that best represent the state of transitive knowledge at any given time. It encourages us to keep an open mind; to stand back from the perspectives, paradigms and epistemologies available to us and be as objective as possible in thinking about the constructive contribution that different approaches to knowledge and different theoretical positions may have to offer; to look for similarities and common ground as well as recognizing differences; to base criticism and judgment on in-depth understanding; to avoid the lure of fashion; and in general to adopt a process of theory development that speaks more of discerning evolution than dramatic revolution.

Doing so would inevitably mean that we would no longer raise particular theoreticians to the status of idols or heroes, since theoretical perspectives would be valued alongside each other rather than exist in status-driven competition.

The Value of Critical Realism to Research, Theory and Practice in Human Psychology and Psychotherapy

The importance of unobservable phenomena: As discussed above critical realism is totally accepting of the existence and importance of unobservable phenomena. It would support our reliance on them within therapeutic theory and practice, and our efforts to study them.

This is an extremely important benefit for human psychology and psychotherapy. When dealing with the internal subjective experiences of the human mind and the potential generative mechanisms and processes that may underlie them, we are largely dealing with phenomena that cannot be known directly and are hypothesized to exist on the basis of observable surface phenomena such as the verbal and non-verbal expression of thoughts and feelings, and the overt behaviours we engage in.

We give material terms to elements of human experience and functioning

that we judge to have consistent enough characteristics to justify their status as entities with a name, such as self-esteem, locus of control, aggression, love, guilt, depression, and anxiety and we develop imaginative models involving generative mechanisms that logic and reason lead us to consider may underlie these human experiences and the relationships between them.

Our imaginative psychological structures and processes include schemas, transference, defence mechanisms, positive and negative reinforcement, reciprocal inhibition, procedural memory and many, many more. To the extent that we have evidence in support of their potential existence, all of these mechanisms and processes whatever theoretical perspective they are associated with, are part of the functioning of our human minds and will have as their substrates our human brains, our nervous system and the rest of our human bodies. The intransitive absolute reality of our human functioning will underlie all of our currently diverse transitive theoretical perspectives and associated psychological constructs.

In addition, critical realism thinks about the relationship between observable surface structures and deeper unobservable ones related to them. In observing the observable cognitions, emotions, and behaviours that we consider to be the surface outcomes produced by underlying deeper structures, we are drawing on the principle that critical realism refers to as transphenomenality. When we recognize the possibility that a phenomenon such as emotion may exist in one form on the observable surface and in a different form at a deeper level, for example anger on the surface, and fear at a deeper level, we are reflecting critical realism's principle of counterphenomenality.

Issues of experimental control and open versus closed systems: The natural everyday context of open systems is totally accepted within critical realism, but at the same time the value of studying entities within more controlled closed systems is not at all excluded. It is the interpretation of research outcomes that are changed, to now reflect tendencies and possibilities. Phenomena can be studied and explored within both open and closed systems with equal validity, with uncertainty and fallibility being seen as the norm in both contexts.

Issues in relation to measurement and statistics: Within critical realism measurement and associated statistics are not essential. As with experimental control they will be used and valued when appropriate to the phenomena under question, and the epistemology that is best suited to their study: all levels of measurement will be allowed.

The existence of multiple epistemologies: Critical realism is accepting of the epistemological pluralism that is characteristic of psychotherapy theory and practice overall, and it is accepting of the need for research epistemologies to fit

the nature of the phenomena under study, rather than impose procedures and practices that are incompatible with them.

From this position critical realism would not deny a place to methods of study derived from logical positivism, but would not adhere to the belief that the outcomes of such studies provided infallible answers to the questions we were asking, or that positivist science was the only source of knowledge. Positivist methods would be seen as making fallible contributions to a wider picture alongside other approaches to gaining knowledge, and all would be seen as contributing transitive understanding that might gradually move closer to intransitive reality.

From a critical realist perspective we would always say that something could be the case, that a certain therapeutic approach can be effective, and we would never say that we could predict, but would be content to say that current evidence pointed towards the possibility of certain outcomes.

Implications for theoretical integration: It is particularly in the context of theoretical integration that critical realism comes to the fore, in supporting us in crossing the boundaries that may otherwise be assumed to separate the knowledge associated with our different epistemologies. It dissolves the need for forced categorization, the emphasis on what is different between approaches, and the need for direct observation and measurement imposed by logical positivism. At the same time it avoids the relativist and idealist pitfalls of post-modern psychology. It gives us permission and encouragement to look at the knowledge available to us across theoretical perspectives on a neutral basis. To feel free to identify and acknowledge the similarities between different theories, and to explore both their commensurable and currently incommensurable differences, whatever their epistemological background. The similarity of constructs identified by different approaches may support the existence of the same intransitive entity, and through their related compatible differences, they may contribute unique aspects of transitive knowledge about that entity, from their particular perspective.

That similarities may logically point towards the same phenomenon having been recognized independently from the basis of different epistemologies, echoes the principle of triangulation that is valued within qualitative research, and provides us with instances of theoretical triangulation. In addition, we will be encouraged to consider the creative possibilities of dialectical synthesis between differences that can logically be argued to relate to the same phenomenon. Critical realism supports us in doing this, even if the theoretical perspectives themselves do not acknowledge that particular constructs may have a common identity, just as was the case between de-phlogisticated air and oxygen.

We are also supported in trying to work towards the resolution of incommensurable and apparently incompatible differences. If that cannot be achieved in any theoretical context that is deemed to be referring to the same intransitive

phenomenon, then critical realism advises us to accept that theory in some respect has got it wrong. It does not accept the possibility of more than one reality, or the co-existence of multiple incompatible constructions of the world around or within us. It is from this position that critical realism supports the overall principle of theoretical unification in relation to any single intransitive phenomenon. If we see our human mind as having an absolute reality, as ultimately being an intransitive entity, then in the final analysis all of the mechanisms and processes associated with our different theoretical perspectives have to be functioning effectively within it. If this cannot be argued to be the case, if some are simply not compatible with others, then somewhere along the line theory is wrong, and it is our job to resolve the incompatibility.

Finally, in recognizing the importance of ontology, the overall real, complex life experience of being, critical realism supports us in taking all aspects of human life into account within the practice of psychotherapy, and in giving full, legitimate and equal place to the contexts and environments within which we live, the complex open systems of our experienced worlds.

Conclusion: Overall human psychology and psychotherapy sit comfortably with Bhaskar's critical realism. From this perspective our current theories about human psychology and psychotherapy all represent fallible and transitive, best current approximations to aspects of what are ultimately intransitive realities. Accepting this could remove the motivation for competition in having claim to the right answer. We would no longer have the option of certainty, and having let go of that, accept that none of our theoretical positions can provide the comfort and reassurance of knowing anything exactly, completely and for sure. We might open ourselves up to greater collaboration in exploring the ways in which different epistemologies and theoretical perspectives may complement each other and help us come to a better understanding of our human selves and the world we live in.

I believe that critical realism as developed by Roy Bhaskar and discussed by Collier (1994) is in a good position to provide a secure philosophical ground for existing and future theoretical approaches to psychotherapy, where the complex and often unobservable nature of their subject matter can be fully appreciated and taken into account, where epistemological pluralism can be supported and where the value and fundamental validity of theoretical integration, and the principle of unification can be recognized and developed.

Summary

In Chapter 4 we have looked at the philosophical basis of Roy Bhaskar's critical realism, considering its core characteristics and discussing the ways in which its principles are consistent with the nature of human psychology and psychotherapy and supportive of research, theory and practice. It avoids the problems raised by logical positivism, and supports the use of multiple epistemologies including logical positivism, which can then be matched to the nature of the phenomena under study. It supports the study of phenomena that function within complex open systems and is primarily dialectical in its approach to knowledge. It is also thoroughly consistent with and directly supportive of the principles of theoretical integration.

Bhaskar's critical realism is consistent with my belief in the absolute reality of our one human mind, and in the unified functioning of the constructs, mechanisms and processes associated with our different theoretical approaches to psychotherapy within that mind, as discussed in Chapter 1. Discovering his philosophy early on in this work provided invaluable formal support to my position, and fed into the ways in which the work unfolded.