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Critical Realism: some responses

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There are more things in heaven and earth Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Hamlet Act 1, scene 5, 159–167

I would like to thank the editors for giving me the opportunity to respond to some of the criticisms raised in the forum on Critical Realism, or what is sometimes known as scientific realism (CR/SR). In this short response I shall attempt to correct some of the misunderstandings of Critical Realism in the forum, but also highlight a fundamental philosophical disagreement that has important political consequences.

Ontology, money, and monkeys

What is strange about Martin Weber's contribution is that having outlined my four planes of social existence (the social cube), he suggests that I would articulate an account of money across only one plane; the material dimension. For example, he claims that 'money should figure as a candidate for a causally structuring ''material object'' in a way at least analogous to ''weapons, buildings, and technology''.[1] But money is a social object, and I say that all social objects have a material aspect, *not* that they are reducible to that aspect. All social objects can only be analysed across all the dimensions of the social cube, but this does not mean that only the material dimension matters. For example, a discourse of nuclear power did not emerge in a material vacuum, but only became possible when the inherent power inscribed in the splitting of the atom became known, and technically possible. This does not mean it was determined that we would develop the science into weapons, only that the discourse wasn't possible without the material context. Just having the discourse of nuclear weapons will not suffice.

As argued in my book 'since all four planes have an impact on social life, then structure can be considered to be the relations that holds between the planes; it is the relations between the conditions for activity that constitute the structures of

[1] Martin Weber, 'Ontologies, depth, and otherwise: Critical Notes on Wight's meta-theoretical proposal of a scientific IR', *Review of International Studies*, 38:1 (2012).

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the social world'.[2] As such, my second plane of human existence, that of intra/intersubjective activity has to be seen as a fundamental aspect of anything that we designate as money. Where I disagree with Weber, however, is that this intersubjective dimension is the only aspect. I am surprised that he has enough epistemological confidence to know that a complex social form such as money can be reduced to this one aspect. I am far less confident that such a reductive approach is an adequate starting point.

Consider how the changing material forms of money interact with the intersubjective dimensions of the phenomena over time. What we think of as money today is very different to how previous generations have thought of money. Indeed, the global financial crisis (GFC) probably could not have happened if money was not today predominantly held as bits and bytes rather that metal tokens. Consider also, how my third plane of social activity, that of 'positioned practices' would also impact on any explanation of money in society today. Hence, those individuals occupying the role of CEO in a bank, experience money in an altogether different way than do those people whose position-practice place (a cleaner perhaps) denies them access to large amounts of money. Consider also, how personal greed at the level of individual subjectivity (my plane 4) could also be a major factor in understanding the materialistic consumption patterns of Western societies. Any adequate explanation of money would require that we pay attention to all four planes of social activity; even if in any substantive explanation we may privilege one dimension.

I am also not claiming that social phenomena are real in the same sense, and in the same way that gravity is real. I go to some lengths to demonstrate how social objects are both concept dependent and activity dependent.[3] But to say this is not the same as saying they are not real. Equally, social phenomena, although concept and activity dependent, are not necessarily dependent on the concepts and activities of those that would wish to know them. Hence the study of the social world sustains the notion of a relative independence from any putative social scientist.

In terms of social objects, Weber equates what is real with what is known. He accepts that gravity is real for both him and the monkey. However, argues that money is not real for the monkey because the monkey does not possess the ability to engage in a discourse that makes sense of money as a social object. He also argues that money would not be real for a group of people who did not share our concept of money, or even have such a concept. So in terms of social objects, Weber is arguing that they are real only for people that possess the concepts related to the social phenomena. Really?

Let's put Weber and the monkey back up in the tree. Consider also, that Weber comes from a group of people that has no concept of money or weapons. Both money and weapons are social objects, so on Weber's account, for both him and the monkey happily up in the tree, neither money nor weapons are real. Let us reintroduce Weber's 'inconsiderate git', as a poacher of monkeys. Monkeys have value for this poacher because they can be turned into money. The monkey doesn't know this and neither does Weber, who remember has no concept of money or weapons. Suddenly our poacher spots the monkey and takes a shot. Unfortunately, he misses the monkey but gets Weber, who falls to the ground stone dead. Well

[2] Colin Wight, *Agents, Structures and International Relations: Politics as Ontology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 298.
[3] Wight, *Agents*, pp. 51–61.

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how did something not real manage to kill Weber? The point is that, although money and weapons needed the poacher to possess the concepts of them in order for them to function for the poacher, their reality is not reducible to his concepts. One could cite numerous examples of such encounters throughout History where groups of indigenous people have encountered colonisers with no concept of how their weapons and technology worked and yet those same weapons and resources function equally well, often to the severe detriment of the indigenous people.

Logic, rules, and intersubjectivity

Oliver Kessler adopts a similar position but extends it to cover all existence; hence his subtitle; 'is reality an assumption we just don't need?' Now, being able to distinguish reality from fiction is probably essential to the survival of any living being; a being that couldn't distinguish real food from fictional food would not last long. Moreover, being able to distinguish what 'is real' from what 'we think' seems to be intrinsic to any science and we surely want to allow the possibility of saying that a particular discourse, racism perhaps, is wrong. Or to put it another way, people of a certain colour are not 'really' inferior to others of a different colour.

Again the issue is intersubjectivity. Kessler argues that for 'constructivists intersubjectively constituted meaning and an assumed "causal relevance" of reality are irreconcilable'.[4] Yet, it is one thing to say they are irreconcilable another to show that they are. What exactly is the argument? Why does the fact that we accept the intersubjectively constituted nature of *meaning* entail that reality has no causal relevance on that meaning? We have already seen how the intersubjective meaning of money and weapons *caused* Weber's metaphorical death. Equally, the intersubjectively constituted meaning of racism causally produces certain forms of behaviour and impacts on the world in important causal ways. Meanings are causes; they causally produce social practices; without certain meanings some things wouldn't happen. If this wasn't the case, it is difficult to see how Kessler's realm of intersubjective meanings could ever be subject to conscious change; we can think differently but we can't use this different thinking to bring about (cause) social change; a decidedly conservative philosophy.

Whereas Weber seems to accept the reality of gravity, Kessler makes it dependent on intersubjectivity. It's surprising to see anyone advocating such an anthropocentric position today. Yet, insofar as Kessler want to reduce everything to rules, or to claim that rules not only legitimate what we count as being real, but literally create what is real, then that necessarily, is anthropocentric; since rules are ontologically prior to existence (question: what are the ontological conditions of possibility for rules?), and since rules are a human construct, then nothing can exist without the rules that determine existence, then that is an anthropocentric metaphysics.

The problem: Kessler argues that the 'world is structured by discourses, communication or language "in use". The sentence "it is p" refers not to an *a priori* given reality, but actually is the result of social processes'. Now, whist it is true that the discourses and languages we use to describe the world provide us with a structure

[4] Oliver Kessler, 'On logic, intersubjectivity, and meaning: is reality an assumption we just don't need?', *Review of International Studies*, 38:1 (2012).

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to our understanding, they can't literally be said to structure the world itself; as if a discourse of only oranges and apples means that the world consists of only oranges and apples. The point; just saying 'it is p' (for example 'it is food'), even in an intersubjective context, does not make it so; the claim 'it is food' involves a complex interaction between how the term 'food' functions within language *and* the existence of a substance that has those properties described in the language.

Kessler thinks that this is all beside the point; 'the kind of materiality we find in social processes is different from matter we find "in the world"'. As already indicated, that much is insisted on by CR, but Kessler goes on, 'the usual examples testifying the importance of the world – like 'a plane can fly, a tree is outside the window, "if I wish to know how many cars are parked in my drive then the easiest way is to probably go and look" (Wight, 'Inside the epistemological cave', p. 4) seems simply beside the point'. First, the quotation from me about cars was in the context of an epistemological discussion not an ontological one; a discussion about how we might come to 'know' something. But second, why are such material factors beside the point? As humans we are embedded in material as well as social structures. Being able to fly, drive cars, cut down trees etc., all depend on the material conditions being accessible; and in fact, if we could move from place to place instantaneously we wouldn't need cars and planes; and if we lack to resources to purchase plane tickets we can't fly; the objective conditions we find ourselves in, both material and social limit (not determine) what we can do.

Kessler's main point seems to be that we can and do, give the world different meanings. Who has argued differently? The fact that we can, and do, give the world in different ways is an integral aspect of CR. A tree might be firewood to one group of people and a religious object to another. But whilst water can conceivably be a religious object for one group of people, it can't be 'firewood' for another group; water simply does not possess the properties required of firewood. This helps explain Kessler's question; 'why such acts are classified differently'. We use certain classifications for all sorts of reasons, sometimes aesthetic, sometimes pragmatic, but also *sometimes* because they capture something of the world. Our classifications help us to navigate the world, and when we get it wrong the world tends to let us know.

Heidegger's shadow

Torsten Michel's contribution confuses me.[5] First, many within CR would read Heidegger as a realist compatible with much of the CR position. Some of the quotations provided by Michel support this; '"A human being is not a Cartesian subject that is in principle distinct from the world, but is an entity whose being is characterised by its very involvement in the world."' For Heidegger, the world is not in question. Moreover, Heidegger also did not see Being as being the exhaustive of existence, 'Being is not the ontological ground of beings … but rather, the possibility of their intelligibility.'[6] Moreover, it is clear that Heidegger explicitly sets out to undermine the view that epistemology is prior to ontology; which of course, is my argument.

[5] Torsten Michel, 'In Heidegger's Shadow: a phenomenological critique of Critical Realism', *Review of International Studies*, 38:1 (2012).

[6] Lambert V. Stepanich, 'Heidegger: "Between Idealism and Realism"', *The Harvard Review of Philosophy* (Spring 1991), pp. 20–8.

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My position on Heidegger is very much in line with that of Husserl. According to Husserl, Heidegger claimed Being and Time would deal with ontology, but from Husserl's perspective it only did so in the first few pages of the book.[7] Having nothing further to contribute to an ontology independent of human existence, Heidegger changed the topic to Dasein. Moreover, everything Heidgger says about Dasien, is compatible with CR, if understood as only refereeing to human being.

But Michel's seems to have a strange understanding of Critical Realism. For example, he argues that CR 'lack[s] a deeper appreciation of the ontological significance of science and language as human activities and potentialities'. In fact, the significance of science and language as human activities and potentialities is inscribed in CR through the notion of the transitive realm.[8] Michel's seems unaware of this arguing that science 'brings to bear pre-established categories of judgment upon the world and thereby establishes the being of the entity in question, but *not* the entity itself'. This is wholly consistent with CR, to quote; 'Knowledge emerges out of a transformation of pre-existing knowledge; a set of antecedent materials; theories, paradigms, models … Knowledge is a social product, dynamically produced by means of antecedent social products'.[9] Where CR would disagree with Michel's is his claim the science establishes the 'being' of the entity; science establishes the meaning, the intelligibility; the entity has its own being.

Michel goes on to argue that what 'constrains human beings is not the ontological object as such then but the very categories we use to grasp them'. He is now in a very similar situation to both Weber and Kessler, arguing that the material properties of the world, rather than the meanings we give to it, do not constrain us. Michel's makes two errors. First, he suggests that 'CR, however, does not ask what makes the being of these objects as objects possible'. But it does, it just doesn't agree that being, can be reduced to Dasein. Being has a mode of being that is not reducible to the Being of the human being. For CR what makes the being of these objects possible are the powers and propensities that they have in virtue of being the kind of object that they are; what more being do they need? Let 'beings' be, and let us stop always trying to find some aspect of ourselves in them. This anthropomorphism is apparent when Michel's suggests, that CR 'exhibits an always already posited understanding of the *meaning* of being manifested in scientific enquiry which itself is never questioned or scrutinised' (emphasis added). Again CR does think meaning exhausts the real. The meaning of objects only emerges in the transitive realm and is for us. Most of nature has no meaning; we give it meaning, we do not give it existence.

Second, Michel argues that 'it seems problematic to simply shift to an ontological foundationalism that seemingly allows us to identify objects without reference to epistemological and methodological tools'. CR is not advocating ontological foundationalism. What I actually say is that, 'This is not to say that ontological statements can be dogmatically asserted. All ontological assertions will require some

[7] Edmund Husserl, *Psychological and Transcendental Phenomenology and the Confrontation with Heidegger* (1927–1931), trans. T. Sheehan and R. Palmer (Dordrecht: Kluwer 1997).

[8] Michel's attempts to make a lot of the supposed CR commitment to the subject/object split. Let me just make my position clear, a position I think, Heidegger would endorse; all consciousness is consciousness of something, that there is no consciousness, as such, cut off from an object.

[9] Wight, *Agents*, p. 37.

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form of epistemological support'.[10] So I do not claim that we can identify objects without reference to epistemological tools?

Kôhra

I simply do not understand what Badredine Arfi means by a positive ontology or ontologism.[11] What is the difference between a positive ontology, ontologism, and ontology? I have no idea. If by ontologism he means an ontology that cannot be questioned, then it is nothing to do with CR. For CR, theories make ontological claims, but all claims are subject to question. To say that X causes some outcome does mean that X exists or that the causal claim is correct. Whether it does or not requires proof, research, and epistemological support.

Arfi argues that, 'strange as this position might sound I think that although ontology is *always* a discursive *construction* it is not possible to formulate a social theory *without* a notion of the ontological.' Why is this strange? All ontological claims are precisely that, claims. How could it be possible to formulate a social theory that didn't have ontological claims within it and how is it possible to articulate an ontological claim apart from through and in, language? Without such claims there could be no theory, because there would literally be nothing; no theory. There is simply no conflict here. Every theory will posit some objects and specify the relations between them. Arfi's own position illustrates this; *Khôra* is a ontological claim, even if as a void; even a claim about nothingness is still an ontological claim. I have no objection to the introduction of *Khôra* into our ontology, but I would need persuading about what it gives us in substantive terms that we do not have already. However, as an ontological claim, it is subject to the same scrutiny as any other. Arfi, on the other hand, attempts to defend *Khôra* from critique by attempting to place it beyond the reach of logic or reason.

He argues that the '"logic" behind rejecting something as being a "fallacy" is at stake here'. Now, a fallacy is basically an error in reasoning or logic. The issue is whether the supposed fallacy is genuine or not. Arfi seems to reject that there could be such a thing as a fallacy (an error in reasoning); he certainly seems to follow his own logic, arguing for both a social theory without ontology and for the fact that a social theory must have an ontology. Taken at face value the two positions are fallacious; it's an error in reasoning to think that both positions can be held at the same time. Arfi tries to get around this by arguing that 'following Derrida that we need to deconstruct the conventional *either-or* logic underpinning the notion of fallacy'. This is one of the great myths of philosophy today and this is not Derrida's argument. Indeed, Derrida argues that a commitment to this form of logic is inescapable:

> it is impossible or illegitimate to form a philosophical concept outside this logic of all or nothing … To this oppositional logic, which is necessarily, legitimately, a logic of 'all or nothing' and without which the distinction and the limits of the concept would have no chance, I oppose nothing.[12]

[10] Wight, *Agents*, pp. 25–6.

[11] Badredine Arfi, '*Khôra* as the condition of possibility of the ontological *without* ontology', *Review of International Studies*, 38:1 (2012).

[12] Jacques Derrida, *Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion* (Limited Inc. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press 1988a), pp. 111–60.

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Derrida accepts the necessity of an all or nothing logic, but wants to put alongside it a supplementary logic of the kind proposed by Arfi. Hence, Derrida accepts with Arfi (and Kessler by extension) about the rejection of conventional logic; clearly he does not.

The quest for certainty

Benjamin Herborth's contribution raises a series of issues, some that overlap with those raised by the other contributors. Yet again intersubjectivity is foregrounded; 'The notion of intersubjective understandings defies the possibility of cognisant subjects standing in opposition to an objectively given world.' I have already dealt with this, but to deal with it in Herborth's terms? Why does accepting the fact of intersubjectivity defy the possibility of an objectively given world? Even in the social world the intersubjective understandings I inhabit are not necessarily shared by all. Hence when others observe me I am objectively real to them, as is my intersubjective universe. Likewise, there may well be social events going on in the world as Herborth reads this response, but those events, whilst depending on some agents holding some intersubjective understandings of them, are not dependent on Herborth's intersubjective understanding. In that sense, they are objectively real to him.

Herborth has also bought into a way of talking about epistemology that is problematic. For example, although he is not alone in this, he refers to a positivist epistemology, or an interpretive epistemology. These are not epistemologies. Positivism is a philosophy of science; empiricism is its dominant epistemology. Notice how often Herborth moves effortlessly from positivism to empiricism, as if they were one and the same. Equally, interpretivism is best described as a methodology, although the initial impetuses driving it are ontological concerns; that is, the social world is intersubjectively constituted. But neither positivism, nor interpretivism will tell us how to differentiate between knowledge claims. Both approaches will produce claims, but the production of a claim is not the same thing as saying that claim is knowledge.

As long as Herborth remains wedded to this view of epistemology he remains in the grip of positivism. For it was only when positivism declared itself to be an epistemology, claiming that only it could produce knowledge, that epistemology became reduced to it. But how does positivism tell us what knowledge is? How does positivism differentiate between knowledge and belief, or sense from nonsense? What is a postpositivist epistemology? Or a feminist epistemology? Or a postmodern epistemology? These kinds of claims confuse an approach to research, or an attitude to the world (which includes ontological commitments), with an epistemology; as if every claim produced by these approaches is 'knowledge'. And it is because Herborth gets epistemology wrong that he thinks CR is in the quest for certainty.

But this is wide of the mark, as I say, 'knowing when we have got things right may be impossible, or knowing when we have achieved it extremely difficult'. Indeed, my chapter on epistemology sets out an epistemological continuum and criticises the view that knowledge can/should be viewed in all or nothing terms;[13] either true or false. That said, I can not see what the issue is here, since Herborth is also

[13] Wight, *Agents*, pp. 226–54.

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claiming to have got something 'right' about Critical Realism; so we are all in the domain of differentiating between right and wrong.

Herborth also misrepresents me in claiming that I am concerned with defending science as 'hierarchically superior to alternative, untheoretical forms of knowledge'. First, I would challenge the assumption that there could be any such thing as 'untheoretical forms of knowledge'. Herborth suggests that knowledge based on political or religious interests are not theoretical. This is a strange view of knowledge, politics, and religion. All political and religious positions have an ontology and as such are theoretical. If the production of knowledge, all knowledge, is socially embedded, then no form of knowledge escapes making theoretical/ontological claims. The idea that political interests, in particular, are not embedded in some theoretical framework, just seems bizarre.

But equally, Herborth just gets me plain wrong on this, because I am categorical that scientific knowledge is not of a higher order than other forms. As I had put in early on in the book, my commitment to science as a form of knowledge production 'should not be taken to imply that science is considered the only valid form of knowledge. Much less is science the supreme form.'[14] Certainty about knowledge is not required to make judgements about better or worse accounts of social phenomena.

Conclusion

The political point: When Marx criticised the Young Hegelians in the *German Ideology*, he did so not only to demonstrate the philosophical error of all forms of idealism (the belief that existence is dependent upon some or other aspect of the human) but to demonstrate the political conservativism that flows from such a position. I do not have space here to develop this point, however, since Marx did it so comprehensively, I'd just suggest people read the *German Ideology*. The new Young Hegelians writing in this forum, all in their own way articulate some version of the positions Marx criticised. This old Marxist continues to believe that there is/was something called 'nature before human history' and that the material/objective conditions – defined broadly to include, as did Marx, social structures – people find themselves in, matter in terms of political, social, and ethical outcomes.[15] A social science that doesn't take them into account, particularly in the context of the contemporary assemblage of a rampant capitalism, isn't worthy of the name.

[14] Wight, *Agents*, p. 18.

[15] There is also a sense that these Young Hegelians are somewhat behind the curve in terms of where the social sciences are heading and there is a distinct move towards a new materialism see, for example, Cool, Diane, and Samantha Frost (eds), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

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