

# Critical Realism & Philosophy Webinar

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Intro.

The need for a philosophical vocabulary

You don't have to become a philosopher, but just as philosophers should know their way around basic sociological theory, it's important to have a command of some fundamentals before you engage with a narrative &/or a conceptual field into which CR fits.

# 1. What is metaphysics?

One way to get a feel for metaphysics is through examples of some metaphysical questions.

Here are a few:

- What is it to be a material object? Are there any? Or does it just seem as though there are?
- What is it to be an entity of *any* kind?
- What kinds of entities exist?
- What is a process? Do processes exist? Or does it just seem as though they do?
- What it is for something to have ways that it is? Ie., properties. And what are properties?
- In virtue of what is something a this and not a that? How are different kinds of things individuated?
- Are wholes something other than a numerical plurality of their parts? Can wholes be ways that none of the parts can be? Are wholes caused by their parts, or composed of their parts?
- What is causation?
- What is necessity? What is possibility?

## 2. What is epistemology?

Epistemology is the study of knowing. Here are some standard epistemological questions:

- What is it to know something?
- Is knowledge different from “mere” belief?
- If so, how?
- How do we know if we have knowledge of something?
- What should make you decide that a given claim counts as knowledge?
- Where do our ideas come from? How do we acquire them?
- What counts as an explanation?
- What should we mean by the concept “true”?
- Are reasons best defined as beliefs that a person has inside of their own minds, or as facts about the external world (e.g., I have a reason for disliking tornadoes. Is the reason my belief that they are dangerous, or the fact that they destroy stuff)?

Metaphysics and epistemology are both cognitive activities -- as all inquiry is. But they have different objects of inquiry.

Metaphysicians study what it is to be something;

epistemologists study what it is to know something.

3. Here are some very general metaphysical and epistemological positions.

a. Metaphysics:

i. Materialism

Materialism is the view that at least some things are neither exhausted in their being by consciousness (or any fact about consciousness) nor equal, interchangeable or reducible in their being to any fact about, or state of, consciousness.

Materialism is consistent with thinking that some phenomena (though not all) are constituted either in part or in full by meanings or ideas.

- Reductive physicalism: **only** material entities exist, and **only** material properties exist; philosophers sometimes refer to the idea that all causes are purely material as “the causal closure of the physical.”
- Non-reductive physicalism: there are purely material substances to which irreducibly

mental properties can be added. Philosophers who think in these terms talk about bodies, plus or minus their mental properties.

Aristotelians, by contrast, do not think that human beings are bodies plus mental properties.

- Aristotelian hylomorphism: with respect to the phenomenon of consciousness, the Aristotelian view is that consciousness is not added on to otherwise-purely-material entities. Rather, sentient material substances are integrated conscious wholes, with emergent properties, mental and physical alike. Aristotelian hylomorphism also includes the idea that things have powers-to-do & that at least some things have ways that they are essentially, such that if they were different, they wouldn't be that kind of thing.

I take this to be the position Roy endorsed under the label Synchronic Emergent Powers Materialism, when he held that view.

## ii. Idealism

- Subjective idealism: ostensibly-material objects are really the thoughts, beliefs, impressions or conscious states (or the possibility thereof) of a given subject.
- Phenomenalism: similar. The being of ostensibly-material objects is exhausted by our subjective experiences (usually sensory). [No "of them" here, since the position is precisely that the "them" (or it) just *is* some unit of subjective experience.]
- Objective idealism: the being of ostensibly-material objects is exhausted by, reducible to or equal to thought or consciousness (but not the thoughts or beliefs of any one person) or to a divine substance or entity (one that is not itself equal to or exhausted by materiality); alternately: only conceptual objects exist fully.

iii. Transcendental Idealism: material objects are genuinely, irreducibly material, but they depend upon a synthetic faculty of reason for (a) their very constitution as objects at all; (b) the fact that they are located in space and time; and (c) their being governed by a deterministic causal order – as well as for all of their properties other than that of materiality.

iv. Conceptual realism: there are fully-constituted, material objects that do not depend upon being cognized for their being or for their nature. (But we can't know what they are like without thinking about them. Therefore, we can't know what they are like "in themselves"; rather, we can only know about our ideas of them.)

Notice that at the level of ontology this view is no different from materialism.

Plus, *nobody* thinks that it's possible to think about things without thinking about things, so that stipulation is not unique to this position either.



From a CR perspective, conceptual realism is either a trivial epistemic point masquerading as an ontology, or it is the epistemic fallacy.

v. Anti-essentialism: the view that things are inherently no way at all, and therefore depend for their identities as a this or a that upon something that is external to them.

vi. Emergence: the view that wholes are something other than a plurality (i.e., a total number) of their parts.

- This is an either/or issue, a fact that is obfuscated by the language of so-called strong versus weak emergence.
- The belief that wholes are something other than the numerical plurality of their parts (or, if you prefer: the belief that a numerical plurality of parts "duly arranged" is something different from a numerical plurality not so arranged) is sometimes called holism. The opposite position is sometimes called atomism.

vii. re: Causation:

- Passivists (also called Humeans) reject the existence of real causal powers; causation, therefore, can't be about anything **doing** anything.
- Powers theorists (or neo-Aristotelians) affirm the existence of real causal powers-to-do; causation is the expression thereof.

b. Epistemology

i. Empiricism: the view that all ideas about the world are derived from sense-data or are arrangements of ideas that are so derived.

ii. Aristotelianism: the view that we have the cognitive ability to grasp the structure, identity or substantial form of things, which form is not reducible to a set of sense impressions.

iii. Rationalism: the view that at least certain key, maximally secure ideas about the world do not come via sense-data or arrangements thereof.

iv. Transcendental idealism: the view that our ideas about the world of material objects come from our sensuous experience of the world, but that experience itself is structured *a priori* by the synthetic faculty of reason (as described above).

v. Fallibilism: the view that it is impossible to be absolutely certain that a scientific theory is true. If you are a fallibilist, you might prefer the term "knowledge-claim" to that of "knowledge" to refer to any existing theory, since the term "knowledge" is often thought to carry with it the idea of certainty.

#### 4. The Concept of Truth

It may be helpful to read my entry on the term in the *Dictionary of Critical Realism* for a run-down of the leading accounts of the concept of truth.

The concept of truth is a norm. It's a norm relative to which claims about the world can be assessed according to how likely they are thought to be to conform to it.

What people disagree about is the content of the norm.

Aristotle famously said "To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true."

That's the content that seems right to me. Notice that I could have said "That is the account that seems to me to be the true one." And I would have meant by "true" what Aristotle says it means. This very inescapability of the concept is important, philosophically.

I want to make only two points, both meta-level.

First, the concept of truth is not:

- any given claim about the world
- some feature of the world to which a given claim refers
- the same as the concept of justification

Take a statement such as: "As a critical realist, I want to know the truth about phenomenon x."

What someone who says this really means is either:

- "I want my beliefs about x to be true"; or
- "The thing that I want to know about is x."

Similarly, the person who says "The truth will set you free" either means:

- having true beliefs (or some specified set of true beliefs) will set you free; or
- some way that the world is will set you free.

And it's the same with: "We hold these truths to be self-evident"; "The truth is out there"; etc. In each case, the concept of truth is being conflated either with some set of true beliefs or with some way that the world is. Don't do that.

The concept of truth is also different from the concept of justification.

Justification is about what the criterion or procedure might be for assessing whether or not a given claim or belief is or might be true, or not.

As with bodies of beliefs that are (or are thought to be) true, and ways that the world is, a criterion or procedure for assessing whether or not a given knowledge-claim is true is not the same thing as the very concept of truth.

Second, Doug referred last time to the term "alethic" truth. The main thing to know is that William Alston's "althetic theory of truth," which Doug also mentioned, is completely different from Roy's, even though they both use the same word. Heidegger also used the term.

As Roy had it, "alethic truth" and "the way the world is" are the same phenomenon. From my perspective, this is to conflate the concept of truth with the concept of "to be."

## 5. Some critical realist terms

### The transitive/intransitive distinction:

This disjunction comes into the critical realist vocabulary in *RTS* as “the transitive object of science” and “the intransitive object of science.”

Bhaskar was working there with an Althusserian-style account of knowledge as productive work being done to something. Unlike Althusser, who conceived of what he called “Generalities” doing the work, Roy had it that it’s people, in this case natural scientists, who do the work.

Scientists work on two different objects, Roy said, when they engage in knowledge production: (a) past theory and (b) the natural world.

- Past theory is the transitive object of science;
- the natural world is the intransitive object of science.



Later came the unfortunate locution of the intransitive and transitive “domains.” I call it unfortunate because it’s not that the “intransitive object” just *means* “the natural world” or always only picks out purely physical phenomena. Knowledge producers who are not natural scientists have things like capitalist social formations and novels as their intransitive objects of science (or inquiry).

Causal mechanism: this term functions in *RTS* as an equivalent for “the powerful thing that produces a given regularity” (with the caveat that sometimes Roy forgot to mention the things and just talked about free-floating powers).

In this very particular use of the term, “causal mechanism” is the answer to a what-question, not a how-question. The causal mechanism is the powerful thing that is generating the observed regularity. You are free to use the term in other ways, but this is how Roy used it in *RTS*.

Ontological stratification: at the most general level, the idea is that phenomenalism is wrong: the

being of things is not exhausted by sensory perceptions of an observer.

More specifically, the idea is that relative to any given observed constant conjunction there are three levels or facts of being. Roy called these the real; the actual; and the empirical.

The "real" refers to the real powers of that which has generated the conjunction, powers that may or may not be expressed, and which would be had by that which is powerful even if they weren't expressed.

The "actual" refers to the actualization or expression of the powers, which expression may or may not be observed.

The "empirical" refers to the observed constant conjunction.

So the metaphor of "ontological stratification" is meant to capture the idea that an observed regularity is produced by something with powers -  
- which powers may or may not be expressed, and

which, even when they *are* expressed, may or may not be observed.

Ontic fallacy: the mistake of thinking that knowledge is directly secreted by objects of inquiry. This captures the meaning of the metaphor of ontological stratification, but it is also a version of the claim that theories are underdetermined by data.

Epistemic fallacy: the mistake of thinking that because claims about the world are claims, they are claims about our thoughts, rather than claims about the objects of our thoughts. This is an issue that Thomas Reid wrote a lot about, by then way, in the 18<sup>th</sup> c. Kant too, in his way, is keen to distinguish thought about thought from thought about objects.

Epistemological relativism: Roy's use of the term is completely idiosyncratic. For him, it meant only that our best theories of the world change over time, and that any given theory that we think is true might turn out not to be true.

Judgmental rationality: also a term of art.

Judgmental rationality is the claim that, contra Kuhn, inter-paradigmatic disagreement about the same real world is possible. Kuhn had suggested that paradigms create their own, entirely unique object-domains, such that those who hold competing paradigms are not talking about the same world, and so cannot even disagree with each other.

Transcendental argument: a transcendental argument takes the form "If you accept the reality of  $x$ , &  $w$  is a condition of possibility for the reality of  $x$ , then you must accept the reality of  $w$ ." Bhaskar's reasoning about the practice of experimentation in *RTS* is of this form.