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## **FREEDOM, DIALECTIC AND PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract.* In this article I present an original interpretation of Roy Bhaskar's project in *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*. His major move is to separate an ontological dialectic from a critical dialectic, which in Hegel are laminated together. The ontological dialectic, which in Hegel is the self-unfolding of spirit, becomes a realist and relational philosophical anthropology. The critical dialectic, which in Hegel is confined to retracing the steps of spirit, now becomes an active force, dialectical critique, which interposes into the ontological dialectic at the 'fourth dimension' of a naturalistically reconfigured account of relational human nature, agency. This account allows Bhaskar to explain and vindicate the crucial role social criticism must play in any realistic project of self-emancipation, and to create a space that didn't exist in Hegel for an open-ended concrete utopianism. Freedom is thus the actualization of human nature, but is not automatic: the relation of human nature to freedom is mediated historically through dialectical critique, which, informed by concrete utopianism, can have emancipatory power.

*Key words:* anthropology, autonomy, dialectic, concrete utopianism, dialectical critique, emancipation, freedom, Hegel, naturalism

### *Introduction*

How should we understand the idea of freedom? What is its connection to the nature and method of emancipatory social criticism? How are these related to the nature of human being? Although recent critical theorists in the tradition of German social philosophy stemming from Hegel have moved away from dialectical thinking (with not entirely happy consequences), these questions concerning the nature of freedom, emancipatory criticism, and human nature come together in the notion of dialectics. But which dialectic? Hegel's account of dialectic, based on the identity of subject and object, produced a closed universe in which freedom could be understood only as the self-unfolding actualization of a social

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substance, spirit, one that stood above individuals and worked behind their backs. In the end, this led to an *affirmative* view of the modern world, a *reconciliatory* understanding of philosophy, and a *resignatory* attitude to critique. While it promised radical criticism of the world in Hegel's early works, dialectical criticism can, for the mature Hegel, only reconstruct what has already been accomplished, reiterate the already-objective actualization of freedom in social institutions. On this view, freedom is conceived as the automatic process of human nature's (spirit's) self-unfolding, but emancipatory criticism is reduced to the vanishing point of speculative redescription of a social world that is taken to be already good enough. For anyone interested in the project of emancipatory social criticism, this way of casting dialectic provides unhelpful answers to our central questions. In *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*<sup>3</sup> (DPF), Roy Bhaskar attempts to reinterpret dialectic so as to differentiate or *open* it, dismantling the presupposition of identity that closed Hegel's dialectic and posited the completed actualization of freedom in the world.

In this article I present an original interpretation of Bhaskar's project.<sup>4</sup> His major move is to separate an ontological dialectic from a critical dialectic, which in Hegel are laminated together. The ontological dialectic, which in Hegel is the self-unfolding of spirit, becomes a realist and relational philosophical anthropology. The critical dialectic, which in Hegel is confined to retracing the steps of spirit, now becomes an active force, dialectical critique, which interposes into the ontological dialectic at the 'fourth dimension' of a naturalistically reconfigured account of relational human nature, agency. This account allows Bhaskar to explain and vindicate the crucial role social criticism must play in any realistic project of self-emancipation, and to create a space that didn't exist in Hegel for an open-ended concrete utopianism. Freedom is thus the actualization of human nature, but is not automatic: the relation of human nature to freedom is mediated historically through dialectical critique, which, informed by concrete utopianism, can have emancipatory power. Whilst I do not attempt to defend in detail Bhaskar's account, an interpretation, insofar as it brings out the coherence and importance of a position will also constitute a partial defence of it, and I hope to show both the coherence and the normative importance of Bhaskar's dialectic from the point of view of the interest in emancipatory social criticism.

### 1. Hegel's Theory of Freedom

The *Philosophy of Right*<sup>5</sup> (PhR) was intended to demonstrate that there are no more fundamental contradictions left in modern *Sittlichkeit*.<sup>6</sup> Hegel's basic preoccupation is the relation between what ought implicitly to be the case about human being and what actually is the case: Kant, in his view, had failed to bring these two dimensions together, leaving the individual torn between two worlds or perspectives, of actor and spectator.<sup>7</sup> Already in his

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<sup>3</sup> Bhaskar 1993/2008 (DPF).

<sup>4</sup> While I agree with many aspects of Alan Norrie's excellent elaboration in *Dialectic and Difference* (Norrie 2010), I take my account to be doing something less wide-ranging and more specific. My focus is on the way that a realist conception of dialectics can reveal the significance of philosophical anthropology for our understanding of, and for our chances of accomplishing, freedom – a significance which comes out especially well when set against the backdrop of idealist accounts.

<sup>5</sup> Hegel 1991a (PhR) (references are to section numbers unless otherwise stated).

<sup>6</sup> Hardimon 1994, 191-2.

<sup>7</sup> Arendt 1982.

essay on 'The spirit of Christianity and its fate', Hegel had developed this criticism, rejecting the Kantian opposition between what is and what ought to be in favour of the perspective of 'life', a conception of what is implicit in human being as a 'human urge and human need'.<sup>8</sup> There, love is conceived as the actualization of life, not as something that comes from outside human being, but which is internally necessitated by it, whereas Kantian ethics is understood as entailing alienation of life from itself because what the ethics of duty demands appears from the perspective of life to be arbitrary and external. Hegel's ambitious mature project is to offer a panacea for this sort of alienation, between what is implicitly required and what is actually the case, by demonstrating from the perspective of speculative reason the *identity* of reason and actuality. By this he means to suggest that what is rationally implicit in human action is in fact manifest in the underlying structures of modern social life as it is. PhR tries to show that modern society is the actuality of this identity between the form of human freedom and the content, that modern 'ethical life is the *concept of freedom which has become the existing world*'.<sup>9</sup> The 'Idea' of freedom is concretely actual in the modern state<sup>10</sup> because the rational form implicit in human action is articulated in a system of concrete social institutions that in their underlying structures and relations both nurture the independence of individual wills and give them anchorage in a context that they can feel they belong to because of the way it respects their freedom.<sup>11</sup> The argument of PhR is thus a 'demonstration that modern institutions and practices promote, or provide the locus for, human self-actualization',<sup>12</sup> and it aspires to show us (*we moderns*) that 'the very meaning of the concept of freedom itself requires us to recognize that freedom is not simply to be found in unrestricted choice',<sup>13</sup> nor indeed in the idea of moral subjectivity under a rational will, but requires that individuals be embedded in a complex social context of institutions and practices that assign duties and roles of the right sort.

On this view, individual freedom is not a mere potential, but a 'determinate way of acting'.<sup>14</sup> Freedom can only be fully realized in an overall context in which the various social spheres of modern life each have their integral role to play in actualizing a different dimension of the whole content of the Idea of freedom. Thus, in justifying modern societies' basic structure by reference to its relation to the content of individual freedom, Hegel seeks to show us how we can be 'at home in the other', and this is possible, on his view, because the other is not really other at all, but the full expression of what we ourselves express. The outcome of Hegel's theory is that freedom is the essence of human being, and that human being must be conceived as more than individual being: it must be conceived as Spirit, and the Idea of freedom is the essence of Spirit. Each particular individual thus embodies the universality of Spirit, and fits into the social world insofar as it is a world which in fact actualizes that implicit universality. We are able, then, to see that the objectivity of the social world, with its coercion and heteronomy, which seems often to conflict with our freedom, is in fact the

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<sup>8</sup> Hegel 1971, 213.

<sup>9</sup> PhR, 142, original emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> PhR, 260.

<sup>11</sup> PhR, 257-8. As Michael Hardimon puts it, the modern state is a place where individuals can 'be at home in the social world' (Hardimon 1994, 188).

<sup>12</sup> Patten 1999, 34.

<sup>13</sup> Houlgate 1991, 79.

<sup>14</sup> Wood 1990, 39.

objective realization of what we in fact are, and so is not in fact fundamentally heteronomous or coercive at all.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. Hegel's Two Dialectics

The argumentative narrative of PhR is structured around a *critical dialectic* (i.e. dialectical criticism). A contradiction is observed by dialectical reason (philosophy) noting a tension between a form of life, and a form of action necessitated by it, for example the conflict between the narrow, negative conception of legal personality and the concept of punishment, which appears as a 'new infringement'<sup>16</sup> within the narrow negative view of freedom that law provides. This tension can only be resolved by moving to *morality*, a new model of action in a new sphere of intersubjective relations.<sup>17</sup> The whole of PhR links these sorts of dialectical arguments to carry us from the most abstract and inadequate ways of understanding individuality to the fullest and most comprehensive perspective on what being free requires. This, on Hegel's view, is a complex set of social institutions and practices integrated into the coherent whole of an ethical life.

I am calling this a *critical dialectic* because, in itself, it is compatible with a radical criticism of the world. It had already emerged in Hegel's early writings, where his reflections on the relation between autonomy and love<sup>18</sup> implied a radical criticism of private property.<sup>19</sup> There, the critical dialectic breaks off. Hegel's unshakable commitment to the idea of freedom of private property ownership meant he was unable to follow up on his insight although he had no solution to the tension. However, by the time of PhR, private property had been rationally integrated into the sphere of objective right, i.e. justified, and the critical dialectic had been systematically conjoined with a new *ontological dialectic* which had the effect of cutting away the critical potential of the former. So the observation in PhR that law and punishment conflict does not motivate practical change of these institutions; Hegel finds the result implied by the critical dialectic *already actual* in the form of moral subjectivity. All one needs to do is see things in a bigger perspective. The ontological dialectic that secures this actuality is to be found in Hegel's conception of the self-actualization of spirit in his philosophy of history, in which PhR finds its completion.<sup>20</sup> This dialectic process goes on without the help of reflective intervention by philosophy or agency, working automatically through the unintended consequences of interaction conceived as a kind of self-regulating automatic system. Thus it sees 'the Idea of freedom as the nature of spirit and the absolute goal of history'.<sup>21</sup> The objective actualization of freedom into the world of social institutions and understandings is secured by the dialectical structure of Spirit or the Idea, which is in essence both concept and actuality, that is, it has an implicit rationality, and this implicit rationality entails that it is actualized in the world; spirit's nature is to make itself explicit in reality. So in Hegel's conception, *history is the self-*

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<sup>15</sup> Which is not to say that any existing society is perfect, but is to say that modern sociality is *fundamentally* adequate.

<sup>16</sup> PhR, 102.

<sup>17</sup> PhR, 103.

<sup>18</sup> Hegel 1971, 305.

<sup>19</sup> Hegel 1971, 308.

<sup>20</sup> PhR, 340.

<sup>21</sup> Hegel 1956, 23.

*actualization of Spirit – the Idea*. ‘Universal history belongs to the realm of spirit’,<sup>22</sup> and ‘the essence of spirit is freedom’,<sup>23</sup> so that the ‘history of the world is none other than the progress of the consciousness of freedom’.<sup>24</sup> Hegel’s mature concept of spirit encompasses the totality of human being, conceived as a complete self-referential structure, and is the explicit realization of the essence of being in general. The important point here is that the essence of spirit, the Idea of freedom, becomes actual not through the deliberate activity of individuals in history, but through the ‘*cunning of reason*’;<sup>25</sup> it is something ‘they realize unconsciously’,<sup>26</sup> governed explicitly by the passions and private interests of real life. In other words, the ontological dialectic – the process by which freedom, the human essence, is actualized in the social world – proceeds without the help of the critical dialectic. Dialectical criticism has no proper role to play in the ontological dialectic itself; now uncritical, the critical dialectic’s task is restricted to reiterating retrospectively the ontological development of freedom that has already been accomplished. That is, philosophy, criticism, and reflective agency informed by philosophy and criticism have no part to play in the actualization of human freedom.

Hegel’s two dialectics, then, critical and ontological, are conjoined in an identity theory to produce a systematic account of the modern world which shows it to be justified because it is the actualization of freedom. The critical dialectics Hegel develops in his philosophy lead to resolutions that are guaranteed in advance by an ontological dialectic of spirit that is understood to operate independently – freely. The purpose of the critical dialectic, around which the text is structured, is to retrospectively reconstruct the development of spirit, human freedom, into the world of objective spirit – the structure of society – by picking out the rational necessity that is supposed to be in evidence in the structural differentiation of the modern state. This generates a basic tension in Hegel’s system, since the *critical* dialectical moves presuppose the conclusions they are supposed to demonstrate, recapitulating an *ontological* process of development, even while the developmental dialectic cannot have been the same as the critical reconstruction of it. It is because the critical dialectic is bootstrapped to an ontological process that is understood by philosophy *ex post* that, while the argument is supposed to show that particular incomplete ways of understanding our freedom entail that a broader conception of freedom, as ethical life, be adopted, such results are fatuous given that the positions that Hegel takes to be incomplete in any case presuppose the context of modern ethical life. It is only from the perspective of modern ethical life that such partial positions as legal personality appear as partial in the first place. As Bhaskar puts it, particular forms only become dialectically contradictory from the perspective of the whole within which they are situated, that is, retrospectively from the perspective of speculative reason. Until the higher perspective is taken, the original terms appear as a mere antinomy (external contradiction); only once the higher, more complete perspective is taken, do the original terms appear dialectically connected (internally related), but at this point, they are no longer contradictory.<sup>27</sup> That is, Hegel’s argument in PhR is mere tautology: it *presupposes* that ‘what is rational is actual; and what is actual is

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<sup>22</sup> Hegel 1956, 16.

<sup>23</sup> Hegel 1956, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Hegel 1956, 19; PhR, 342.

<sup>25</sup> Hegel 1956, 33, original emphasis.

<sup>26</sup> Hegel 1956, 25.

<sup>27</sup> DPF, 62.

rational',<sup>28</sup> with the implication that philosophy's task is not to criticize the world, not to tell it how it should be, but to demonstrate how it is already rationally structured.<sup>29</sup> That the actual social world has an underlying rational structure that can be revealed from the standpoint of speculative reason is the *premise*, as well as the result, of the tautologous PhR, a premise guaranteed in advance by the metaphysical story that thematizes being as self-contained and self-actualizing reason (the Idea) and history as the process of its actualization, a metaphysical theory based on *the identity of reason and being*.<sup>30</sup> Now this idea of freedom as self-actualizing, the identity of (human) being and (human) reason makes it seem as if freedom, as the essence of the self-actualizing totality of (human) being – spirit – is independent of criticism. The effect of this is to detach freedom and critique: the whole orientation of emancipatory social criticism is cut away by an affirmative and ultimately ideological account of the social world.

Why did Hegel's philosophy develop in this way, especially in light of its more critical beginnings in his youth? The idea of spirit as an automatically self-actualizing totality is implicit in the overdemanding concept of freedom Hegel inherited from Fichte: Fichte conceived freedom as complete *self-referentiality* – totalized self-determination with no outside.<sup>31</sup> Hegel articulated this self-referring, free whole at a non-personal level, in his concept of spirit, 'the substance as subject'.<sup>32</sup> Only such a concept could satisfy the demand to be exclusively self-referring, that is a closed totality and, on the conception of freedom inherited from Fichte, only such a closed totality would do. But the price paid for this innovation is the de-coupling of the two central notions in the idea of freedom – autonomy and self-actualization; the self that is putatively autonomous, the individual self, is not the same as the 'self' that is self-actualizing, because the latter is not the individual person but the whole social totality of human being, spirit. This is a serious problem for Hegel's account of the development of human freedom, since it seems to split irreparably the two components of freedom. But this problem seems to arise from Hegel's assumption, taken over from Fichte, that freedom must be interpreted as absolute self-reference. It is this premise that ultimately means there must be no outside of freedom. And it is also this commitment that means explanatory criticism can have no role to play in emancipation, for explanations presuppose the non-identity of what is explained. But if freedom is the essence of the totality of spirit, there is no outside that needs explaining.

### 3. Bhaskar's Critique of Hegel

Bhaskar contends that Hegel's philosophy of freedom depends on an illicit closure of 'both being and knowledge, united by the principle of *identity*'.<sup>33</sup> It is the identity between being and thought that produces a view of history as a 'constellationally closed totality',<sup>34</sup> that is, a process that is fundamentally complete. The dialectic between freedom and history is thus collapsed into an identity between freedom and history. This results in an *identity of*

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<sup>28</sup> PhR, 20.

<sup>29</sup> PhR, 21.

<sup>30</sup> PhR, 12.

<sup>31</sup> Henrich 2003, 291.

<sup>32</sup> Henrich 2003, 289.

<sup>33</sup> DPF, 121.

<sup>34</sup> DPF, 189

*freedom and fate*<sup>35</sup> such that Hegel's conception of freedom appears in PhR as 'an immanent self-entailing/validating phenomenological circle'.<sup>36</sup> Bhaskar's critical engagement with Hegel leaves much of Hegel's thought about freedom intact – its relation to practical social life, its relationality, the role of dialectics in establishing this, and the process of dialectic in unfolding freedom understood as unactualized implicit essence. However, it rejects much of the structure of Hegel's philosophy, Hegel's theory of the state and theory of history, and accordingly his conception of the tasks of philosophy. This system basically construes freedom as already actual, history as the self-actualization of an intersubjective Spirit that is irreducible to individual agency, and philosophy and critical dialectics as a retrospective discipline whose task is to discern the rationality in the actual. There is much in Hegel's philosophy that is of crucial importance, but the load-bearing structures of the mature theory are unsound. Hegel's theoretical presuppositions divert many of his insights from critical paths into a cul-de-sac whose destiny is to affirm the social reality one is confronted with. As such, it ultimately offers little in the way of resources for an emancipatory critical theory.

Bhaskar's aim is to transformatively reconstruct Hegel's idea, so as: to retain the thought that freedom is the 'essence' of human being, and not just a 'mere ought', without assuming that it is 'actual'; to retain the thought that individual autonomy thus depends on broader conditions of a social nature, without relying on an organicist<sup>37</sup> model of spirit; and to thematize the actualization of freedom in *self-emancipatory* terms rather than as an automatic function of spirit unintended by agents, thereby inserting dialectical critique and agency informed by it into the ontological process of freedom's development. His strategy is to reject the demand for self-reference: identity theory irrevocably ties freedom to the necessity of positive actuality ('fate'), and must be rejected.<sup>38</sup> The very idea that the demands of freedom could only be satisfied by a self-referring totality is the *problem*, and it is for this reason that Bhaskar's core emphasis on *non-identity*, *absence* and *open totality* are so important in naturalistically transforming Hegel. In order to retrieve a dialectical historical naturalism, the identity between freedom and history that underpins the circularity of PhR must be opened.

Rejecting the demand for absolute self-reference, closure, identity, allows Bhaskar to distinguish the critical and ontological dialectics that Hegel collapsed, and to constellate the critical within the ontological. The ontological dialectic, in Hegel a metaphysically closed conception of self-actualizing spirit, becomes a naturalistic, dialectical *philosophical anthropology*, structured around the concepts of non-identity, absence, open totality and transformative agency. The critical dialectic, in Hegel a retrospective glance charting an already-accomplished attainment of freedom, is in Bhaskar reinserted into the ontological dialectic at the key point (missing in Hegel) of what Bhaskar calls the fourth dimension of dialectic – human agency itself. Dialectical critique, on Bhaskar's account, reflects on the non-identical social world and has a crucial role to play within that world, forestalling the fatalism and 'endism' that makes Hegel's system reconciliatory and impotent. The actualization of freedom is not automatic but depends on *dialectical criticism* and genuinely *self-emancipatory* practice informed by it – that is, on *transformative agency*. And where

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<sup>35</sup> DPF, 281n.

<sup>36</sup> DPF, 204.

<sup>37</sup> See Rosen 1996, 147-8, 156.

<sup>38</sup> DPF, 248-9, 264n.

Hegel's identity between ontological and critical dialectics produces a closed totality in which utopia is already concretely actual, Bhaskar's conception of the real needs implicit in human being leads to a *concrete utopianism* that imaginatively develops the implications of (meta-)critical dialectics into a differentiated vision of the *necessary but non-actual* relational conditions of full freedom. There is no longer a strict separation of nature and history, being and change, freedom and necessity, but neither are these terms collapsed. Rather, they are articulated in 'constellational unity'.

It seems to me that this project is best understood as a philosophical anthropology; for philosophical anthropology is just the philosophical ontology of human being. Although Bhaskar does not, I think, use this terminology in *DPF*, in *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* his discussion of explanatory critique concludes with the suggestion that ultimately critical social science is necessarily informed by

a view about human nature ... Such an anthropology need not, and on the transformational view, should not, be an ahistorical one. But some anthropology is the condition of any moral discourse at all. As ontology stands to epistemology, so anthropology stands to ethics; indeed, one could say that anthropology just is the ontology of ethics.<sup>39</sup>

The last sentence is potentially misleading: if anthropology stands to ethics as ontology stands to epistemology then, while ethics will be included in the object-domain of anthropology, it will not exhaust it, just as knowledge does not exhaust the object-domain of ontology. Rather, we should say that anthropology is the ontology *for* ethics – the theory of *human being*. And we must make a further distinction, which Bhaskar makes in relation to ontology, between scientific and philosophical anthropology. The latter underlabours for the former, by specifying the conditions of intelligibility of the former. And, while it is true that scientific anthropology must not be ahistorical, it is not the case that philosophical anthropology mustn't be ahistorical. For, if it is true to say that human nature is necessarily historical, it is also true to say that an historically unchanging fact about human nature is that it is always historically mediated. And it becomes an interesting question what the conditions of possibility of this circumstance are, a question that philosophical anthropology seeks to answer. It is to this latter project, I believe, that Bhaskar turns in *DPF*, whether or not he explicitly understood this to be his task.

Now the very idea of a philosophical anthropology has come to seem suspect to many.<sup>40</sup> To offer a defence of this project would be beyond the scope of this article, but it is worth pointing out that, so long as a basic commitment to naturalism is accepted, the objection to some form of ontology of human being is unclear. Philosophical anthropology is harder to get away from than has sometimes been thought. Take, for example, the controversy over whether Marx rejected philosophical anthropology. It was once commonplace to say that since Marx thought human nature necessarily historically mediated, he therefore must have rejected the idea of human nature. Geras has shown persuasively that, textually, this is implausible.<sup>41</sup> But it is also implausible philosophically. When Marx claims, in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach, that the 'essence of man' is 'the ensemble of the social relations',<sup>42</sup> this does

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<sup>39</sup> Bhaskar 1986/2009, 207.

<sup>40</sup> For example, Jürgen Habermas retracted his own attempt at a philosophical anthropology shortly after it was published; see Habermas 1972/1987, 'Postscript'.

<sup>41</sup> Geras 1983.

<sup>42</sup> Marx 1977a, 157.



not imply that there is nothing to be said about human nature apart from historically specific social relations. For it is perfectly clear that for human beings to be the sort of beings who are constituted in their essence by social relations, there must be some ontological features of human being in general that make this possible. Indeed, the very claim that human beings are essentially socially relational is a claim in the nature of philosophical anthropology. For the point of making it is to differentiate human nature from the rest of nature, which is *not* constituted in its essence by historically specific social relations, and there must be some features of human being that account for why and how, unlike rocks, other animals etc., we humans *are*.

Indeed, a philosophical anthropology that can account for the complexity, diversity, and universality of socialized human being while situating that within a broader naturalistic account of being as a whole ought to be an attractive proposition. This is just what Bhaskar's dialectic aims to do. By insisting that freedom is a real potential and a genuine need in relational human being, whilst also insisting that it is not an automatically self-actualizing potential, Bhaskar steers a path between the impotent 'mere ought' of which Hegel was wary, and what we might call the resignatory 'already is' to which his philosophy ultimately leads. The resulting picture, I want to suggest, can serve to underlabour for emancipatory critique by showing how freedom is a realistic aspiration that can be legitimately linked to the role of explanatory critical theory.

#### *4. Ontological Dialectic I: Philosophical Anthropology*

Although obviously to some extent speculative and not entitled to the name transcendental in the traditional strict sense, Bhaskar's philosophical anthropology is quasi-transcendental insofar as it aims to articulate the conditions of the possibility of always-historically-mediated human being. But unlike traditional transcendental philosophy, the conditions it identifies are ontological – that is, they specify characteristics of being (specifically human being).

The first core dimension or 'prime moment' of Bhaskar's anthropology is *non-identity*,<sup>43</sup> the premise that being is non-identical to thought, which Bhaskar had already argued for as the *existential intransitivity*<sup>44</sup> of being as a condition of scientific practice.<sup>45</sup> The premise of non-identity captures Bhaskar's commitment to ontology as distinct from epistemology; it entails that the 'world is characterized by intransitivity, stratification, transfactuality, multi-tiered depth, emergence ... and change'. The non-identity of being from thought, object from subject (or intersubjectivity) is crucial for situating the possibility of agency, practice and change. On this realist view, particular forms of life are always situated within the context of a real, structured, changing world characterized by real natural necessity. This counters Hegel's collapsing of the 'real, necessary and possible to the domain of the manifest, evident or apparent', insisting that it is necessary to distinguish the *real* from the *actual* if necessity is to be maintained.<sup>46</sup> This is because it is necessary to distinguish between the

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<sup>43</sup> DPF, 206, 233.

<sup>44</sup> DPF, 210.

<sup>45</sup> Bhaskar 1975/2008; I have discussed the argument in detail in Reeves 2009, 333-8.

<sup>46</sup> DPF, 234-5.

domain of events and happenings – actuality – from the underlying natural necessity that produces the actual if the order and necessity of the actual, which is not structured by constant conjunctions in a world of open and changing systems, is to be intelligible. Now this sort of realist ontology brings into view the impossibility of Hegel’s notion of freedom as a self-referential totality. The basic alterity of being means that the idea of freedom as essential to the nature of human being must be construed in the context of such alterity. The necessary alterity and depth of being must be understood as constitutive of the aspiration to self-actualization and autonomy. That is to say, the difference or otherness constitutive of the world need not and should not be seen as a limitation *per se* to freedom, as if anything short of total identity would fall short of full autonomy. The non-identity of being is a condition on human being, as any action presupposes what Bhaskar calls ‘referential detachment’, and any worthy conception of freedom must build in this feature of what I am calling transcendental anthropology.

Implicit in the non-identity of being is the notion of non-identity *within* being: negativity or *real absence*.<sup>47</sup> This is because the distinction between *real and actual* implies the possibility of the *absence* of the real in the actual, that is, the ‘*non-actual real*’,<sup>48</sup> and it is in this sense that the idea of absence plays a crucial role in conceptualizing agentive change, the concept that underpins the possibility of autonomous self-actualization and the actualization of autonomy. It is crucial to the domain of anthropology, since it is in this domain that we see the emergence of a dialectic between (historical) nature and (natural) history, in which the actualization of autonomy depends on breaking through a conception of nature as a fixed domain of constant conjunctions and the view of history that posits freedom as independent of that domain of nature. And it is crucial for understanding how human nature might be necessarily historically mediated: for it is a necessary condition of real change, and human nature can be irreducibly historical only if real change is possible. The concept of determinate absence thus provides a way of understanding the gap between the real nature of human being and its historical actuality, without separating nature and history in a categorical sense. It can be understood productively as a way of theorizing Marx’s distinction between actual life and species being,<sup>49</sup> between the historical actuality of a mode of life, in which our nature is expressed and actualized in ways that may be contradictory, and the real but unactualized nature of human being. The possibility of absence, the gap between actuality and the non-actual reality of human being, grounds the rationale for explanatory critique in the basic ontological distinctions already implied by non-identity and thus natural science, while accommodating within this naturalistic structure the uniqueness of human being as natural-historical being.

The third ‘level’ of Bhaskar’s dialectic is that of *totality*.<sup>50</sup> Bhaskar develops a set of concepts that operate at the level of totality, the aim of which is to understand the internal structure of social being. Concepts of totality seek to theorize the ways in which the actuality of human nature in concrete social forms is structured. Totality presupposes, of course, non-identity and absence, but articulates particular ontological forms that human social life can take. It thus provides the next crucial element of an anthropology, since it depicts forms that absence can take in actuality. Bhaskar argues that totality is *sui generis*, and its basic

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<sup>47</sup> DPF, 238.

<sup>48</sup> DPF, 181.

<sup>49</sup> Marx 1977b, 81.

<sup>50</sup> DPF, 270.

feature is that of 'entity relationism' or relationality. To appreciate entity relationality is 'to see things existentially constituted, and permeated, *by their relations with others*'.<sup>51</sup> Such relational constitution of entities is dependent on internal or *dialectical relations*, and to grasp that things are relational, especially that in human life, agents, processes and relations are dialectically related, is important for appreciating both how freedom is dependent on otherness, and how this does not entail that a supra-individual entity should be assigned supremacy.

Social life is always structured in terms of emergent totalities, and these are constituted by dialectical relations between individuals, entities and relations. Totality for Bhaskar is a naturalistic, materialist concept or set of concepts. It does not operate on the terrain of illicit teleological or organicist or expressivist conceptions of totality that subsume and cancel the significance of the individual, which distinguishes it from Hegel's sense of the term. In its realist sense, totality is a complex made up of dialectical relations which 'cohere' in such a way that, while the overall structure exerts causal influence, 'conditioning, limiting, selecting, shaping, blocking, etc.', on the individual elements, conversely the structural relations in which those elements sit causally influence each other, and so influence the whole structure in turn.<sup>52</sup> This notion of totality as a cohering set of dialectical relations is the naturalistic transformation of Hegel's concept of spirit, enabling us to conceptualize totalized, complex, interdependent processes and differentiated but cohering, and possibly contradictory, wholes without relying on non-natural assumptions about the way in which the elements of a totality interact. The interdependence of elements in a totality, and of the totality with its elements and their relations, is conceived causally, in terms of what Bhaskar calls *holistic causality*. He argues that this idea of totality involving holistic causality is necessitated in science by 'the need to maximize explanatory power', since the objects of explanation may be subject to various forms of intra-action, and their activity would be impossible to explain adequately without such concepts.<sup>53</sup> In other words, the concept of holistic causality just articulates what science at its best already knows – that totalities have their own special causal powers. In the social domain, Bhaskar gives various examples of the necessity to think in terms of totality, relationality or intra-action, including the structure of texts, languages and musical compositions.<sup>54</sup> Totality is thus an emergent level of being constituted through existential interdependency, and is an essential structure of anthropology, since no human being would be possible in its absence.

The fourth, and crucial, dimension in Bhaskar's anthropology is the irreducibility of *agency*. The original argument is provided in *The Possibility of Naturalism*, where Bhaskar defends a transformational model of social action (TMSA), the central claim of which is that, while social structures are *sui generis* real, they depend on agency for their reproduction (and possibly transformation), so that both structure and agency must be considered irreducible conditions of social life. Now in *Dialectic* Bhaskar proposes 'negative and other generalizations of the transformational model of social agency, to produce a dislocated dialectics of structure and agency', which in turn produces a conception of 'four-planar

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<sup>51</sup> DPF, 125, original emphasis.

<sup>52</sup> DPF, 126-7.

<sup>53</sup> DPF, 123.

<sup>54</sup> In particular, the idea of relationality provides a much-needed alternative to the bereft doctrine of methodological individualism, on which see Lukes 1979; Bhaskar 1979/1998, ch. 2; Norrie 2010, 88-9; Agar 2006, 44-45.

social being'.<sup>55</sup> Bhaskar interprets four-planar being as a development of the TMSA, a sociological model, into an anthropological one, since he equates four-planar being with 'human nature' itself.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, he distinguishes between four-planar being and the 'social cube', the former 'encompassing' the latter.<sup>57</sup> That is, four-planar being, as an anthropological generalization of the ontological features of human being, situates human individuality in a causal role within a necessarily relational context.

Agency must be understood naturalistically, for Bhaskar, which is to say that it must be understood as the complex of distinctive powers and capacities that is distinctive of human subjects. The central concept is that of 'intentional embodied causally efficacious agency',<sup>58</sup> which conceives of agents as necessarily bodily, situated in a material world and so subject to necessity, and participating in the order of necessity in virtue of the causal power of intentional action. This entails the naturalistic position that reasons can be causes,<sup>59</sup> rejecting Kantianism (which sees reason as a domain distinct from nature), and hermeneutics (which understands interpretation of meaning as being distinct from explanation of causes), instead arguing for the 'constellationality of reasons within causes and of the emergent powers traditionally associated with mind within a partially socialized nature'.<sup>60</sup>

Now the concept of embodied agency Bhaskar is working with here is one that is always-already situated within a world characterized by the first three elements of his anthropology – non-identity, absence and totality; that is, it presupposes the "material thrownness" of human being'.<sup>61</sup> 'Four-planar being' situates the embodied agent as thrown into a natural-social world characterized by four types of mutually irreducible relationships: 'material transactions with nature'; interpersonal interactions; 'social relations' proper, i.e. social structural relations; and 'intra-subjectivity', by which he means the relational structure of the self.<sup>62</sup> This is crucial for understanding Bhaskar's conception of embodied agency, since it entails that agency is always constitutively related in four different ways that can each be distorted, and that must not be reduced to one another. The place of agency in the context of non-identity, absence and totality must be understood within this four-planar topology.

So far we have the rudiments of Bhaskar's philosophical anthropology, his naturalistic account of the ontological dialectics of human being. Non-identity, absence, relational totality and agency are the four basic terms of a realist dialectic that are features of human being which are, on Bhaskar's view, necessary conditions of human being generally. That is, there could be no recognizable human being in a world lacking any of these four key features. How does this account situate the idea of freedom as a real potential and need? If human being is necessarily thrown in a world of non-identity, real absence, and relational totality, and characterized by embodied agency, this suggests a certain interpretation of freedom. Any adequate idea of freedom will have to answer to the constraints that these

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<sup>55</sup> DPF, 276.

<sup>56</sup> DPF, 153.

<sup>57</sup> DPF, 153, 160.

<sup>58</sup> DPF, 277.

<sup>59</sup> Originally advanced in Bhaskar 1979/1998, ch. 3.

<sup>60</sup> DPF, 277.

<sup>61</sup> Norrie 2010, 220.

<sup>62</sup> DPF, 153.

anthropological features impose. But to understand the idea of freedom Bhaskar proposes, we will need to consider more closely the nature of embodied agency.

### 5. *Ontological Dialectic II: Desire to Freedom*

Bhaskar here follows a line of thought that runs from Socrates to Hegel, through Freud and Levinas, that agency is fundamentally erotic: the motor of agentic intentionality is *desire*. Now Bhaskar's analysis of desire presupposes the relational, non-identical context of life that we have been piecing together. First, desire presupposes referential detachment, or in other words the *non-identity* of the object, since the object of desire must paradigmatically be conceptualized as other. Second, 'desire presupposes absence, viz., of the intentional object in Brentano's sense, of the desired'.<sup>63</sup> Bhaskar's claim is that agency is paradigmatically the process by which experienced desires are to be 'absented', or more straight-forwardly, removed, and that this gives us a base concept of freedom, since it contains the seed from which grows the impulse to be free. Freedom, on this view, is grounded in desire, which is anthropologically deep-seated, and its content is the agentic removal of absences.

Bearing this in mind, we can reconstruct Bhaskar's argument that links desire to freedom:

In the social world, praxis is typically dependent upon wants, which are rationally accessible, causally efficacious beliefs, dependent upon a conative component which is most radically captured by the concept of *desire*.<sup>64</sup>

Practical life, action, for embodied agents – individual subjects understood naturalistically as the sort of animals we are, immersed in a world of non-identity and totality, with our emergent powers of intentional action based on reasons – is motivated by experienced absence or desire, the conatus of embodied agency as such. At this point, Bhaskar wishes to generalize the experience of absence (desire) so that

ceteris paribus, this presupposes a meta-desire to remove any constraints on its satisfaction.<sup>65</sup>

This meta-desire to remove constraints is the point at which freedom begins to enter the picture. Constraints on removing or remedying absences are experienced as barriers to self-determination or freedom. What does this 'meta-desire' entail?

The desire to overcome constraints ... on the satisfaction of desires, wants ... and needs implies a conatus ... to knowledge of all four planes of the social tetrapoly ... this [conatus], mediated by the political skills and practical wisdom shown in collective totalizing agency, will take humanity to the eudaimonistic life for all.<sup>66</sup>

The suggestion here is clearly that explanatory knowledge is implicated in freedom because it is implicated as a *condition of the meta-desire to remedy experienced ills*. Given that agency is embedded in a material world of necessity, in which we participate, desire

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<sup>63</sup> DPF, 242.

<sup>64</sup> DPF, 242, original emphasis.

<sup>65</sup> DPF, 242.

<sup>66</sup> DPF, 180.

implicates the desire to overcome *constraints* on satisfying desire, and this implicates a conatus, an axiological tendency, to explanatory knowledge of concrete human being. The point here is that the experience of absence, whether or not of a real absence, carries with it the evaluative stance toward absence that it is an ill, and furthermore, that constraints on remedying such ills are themselves ills.<sup>67</sup> This argument is something like an anthropological pragmatics, which identifies in agency as such a conatus to freedom, a concept that has much richer implications than the bare notion of agency, and yet is implied by the latter. The experience of elemental desire in the infant's 'primal scream' is taken as the most basic and universal experience of desire, so as to establish the universality of the '*desire for freedom*',<sup>68</sup> and the 'goal of universal human autonomy can be regarded as implicit in an infant's primal scream'.<sup>69</sup> The need for autonomy is implicit in this elemental desire, since it embodies the appearance of a conatus to knowledge because, as Norrie puts it, it is 'the first act of referential detachment, indicating the real, existentially singular need to absent absence ... This is axiological – that is, intrinsically necessary and valuable – for human being, and such a necessity remains with human beings',<sup>70</sup> although of course the content of such necessity becomes exponentially richer.

Now the significance of understanding the relational and totalized nature of social being for our understanding of freedom is that it is at the level of totality and relationality that social conditions are capable of frustrating freedom, of perpetuating constraints on individual self-determination. Bhaskar follows Marx in understanding the basic absence of freedom as *alienation*, or more generally heteronomy, and argues that at the level of totality various forms of relationship can be theorized, along with various cognitive, discursive or ideological accompaniments, that block autonomy. 'The totality is itself structured, and so may contain or be contained by dialectically contradictory ... relationships',<sup>71</sup> and these dialectically contradictory relations form the bedrock for alienating modes of life. Alienation means '*being something other than, ... separated, split, torn, or estranged from oneself, or what is essential and intrinsic to one's nature*'.<sup>72</sup> In turn, this is linked back to the idea of desiring agency when Bhaskar notes that in the early Hegel, autonomy is linked to love, which is 'a paramorph for the desire for de-alienation, that is, for the restoration, perhaps in a much more complex and differentiated totality, of the unity between the agent and everything *essential to her nature*'.<sup>73</sup> The notion of alienation, then, links up several important notions in Bhaskar's anthropology. For, as I read it, alienation is the paradigmatic case of a constraint understood as an absence that blocks the free remedy of ills. To be alienated is to experience a real absence of something 'essential to one's nature'. Putting this together with Bhaskar's account of the relational context of agency, four-planar being or human nature, we can see how individual freedom is internally linked to the structure of a totality. For constraints that constitute alienation of the individual from their nature must be understood as constraints on the *relational* being of the individual.

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<sup>67</sup> DPF, 277.

<sup>68</sup> DPF, 288, original emphasis.

<sup>69</sup> DPF, 264.

<sup>70</sup> Norrie 2010, 140.

<sup>71</sup> DPF, 127.

<sup>72</sup> DPF, 114, original emphasis.

<sup>73</sup> DPF, 243, original emphasis.

## 6. Dialectical Contradiction and False Necessity

We are now beginning to see how Bhaskar understands freedom, as a need and potential for the absence of real absences. As a mere speculative ideal, any conception of freedom would appear impotent, as Hegel puts it, an empty 'ought' opposed to what in fact is. Bhaskar's dialectical anthropology is, firstly, designed to reveal how the ontological development of freedom is related to necessity without identifying freedom with fate. It seeks to show how freedom is something immanent and tangible, rather than transcendent and empty, while avoiding the picture on which freedom is an automatic development independent of dialectical criticism. And it retains Hegel's insight that freedom depends on a totalized context, without relying on an organicist concept of spirit. Now I said that Bhaskar's strategy is to separate the ontological and critical dialectics that Hegel collapsed. If we have in place so far the anthropological conditions of freedom's possibility and development in a way that refuses to see self-actualization as automatic or as an unconscious process of a supra-individual spirit, we still need to elaborate on the conditions that make the critical dialectic a possible (indeed necessary) means of emancipation in a non-identical world. This is another way of putting the question: are there sources of unfreedom or alienation that can be abolished (only?) by practice informed by dialectical critique?

The crucial concept to answer this question is that of a *dialectical contradiction*. Bhaskar understands this as a special kind of *dialectical connection*, the sort of interrelation characteristic of relationality in the social world. Whereas a dialectical connection specifies a relation between two or more things whereby one or more of those things is partially constituted by its relation with the others such that they are 'in principle *distinct* but *inseparable*', a dialectically contradictory connection exists where any two internally related things are also '*mutually tendentially exclusive*, and potentially or actually tendentially transformative'.<sup>75</sup> Non-necessary dialectical contradictions<sup>76</sup> are sources of unfreedom because they give rise to *false necessity* and the TINA compromise ideology that it generates. In a world of 'generalized master–slave relations', which are a species of social dialectical contradiction, false or unnecessary necessities abound and generate ideological compromises leading to and rationalizing *axiological inconsistencies*. Now given that Bhaskar rejects the Kantian idea of a pure reason, and understands agency as participation in the order of necessity, axiological indeterminacy or *practical antinomy* can readily be seen as a block to the agent's capacity for self-determination, since in a world in which acting is imperative, the ability to act consistently is understood as integral to the idea of autonomy. Where the individual is forced to act according to inconsistent, *de facto* false necessities, she is being determined by forces that are untrue to her constitution as embodied agency. The individual is alienated or split-off from their real nature, namely, the *axiological necessities* or needs that are entailed by the nature of the 'concrete singular' human being. The presence of false necessities, which can be specified only through

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<sup>75</sup> DPF, 58, original emphasis.

<sup>76</sup> Some may be necessary, what Bhaskar calls existential contradictions. Thus, DPF does not exclude the possibility that there may be insuperable contradictions at the heart of human existence, and does not in principle rule out a much more pessimistic view than Bhaskar himself proposes. For example, we might interpret Lacan's notion of the constitutive alienation of (illusory) subjectivity, Sartre's conception of the necessity and impossibility of sex, or Levinas's conception of the infinite demands of the ethical, as existential dialectical contradictions. Whether these in fact *are* existential contradictions is of course another matter.

substantive explanatory critique, are violations of axiological necessities, which are frustrated by the antagonistic elements of social life that determine individuals according to needs that are untrue to their real nature. To explicate this point, the discovery of false necessities is the discovery of an 'unnecessary source of determination',<sup>77</sup> and such sources of determination, when ideologically clothed, are real blocks to the autonomy of the individuals involved. As we saw, embodied agency is at its core desirous, and since desire is essentially a conatus to change, to remedy a perceived absence, then agency is essentially oriented to practical change. Here the vision of autonomy that begins to emerge is one that takes seriously the nature of embodied agency participating in a world of necessity, having rejected any Kantian residue that would situate autonomy outside of the domain of natural necessity. But of course, in this case, natural necessity per se is no longer understood as a barrier to autonomy. Rather, it is our relation to natural necessity that is the seat of autonomy *and* its possible blockage.

Now for several important points about false necessity. First, it depends on Bhaskar's distinction between real and actual. The real, in the anthropological setting, comes to be seen as the underlying emergent structured reality of human being, with its real capacities, potentials and needs, that is, real human nature. The distinction between the real and actual allows for the real absence of the real in the actual. The theory of false necessities, which sees them as forms of alienation and blocks to autonomy, entails that, where such false necessities prevail, there is a determinate absence of some aspect of the real nature of human being, the capacities and needs implicit in human nature itself, and it is this that licenses the general diagnosis of some social form as pathological or 'ill', as a constraint. It is an ill or constraint because some aspect of real human being is blocked, really absent. Its lack is experienced as an absence, and agency is implicitly committed to a negative evaluation of such absences, since it is phenomenologically internal to the experience of desire that a real absence may be an ill.

Second, this account of false necessities makes it intelligible how individual autonomy could be blocked by the structure of a larger totality without needing to resort to the idea of spirit. In turn this will clarify the way in which autonomy or self-determination for Bhaskar is something pertaining to the individual self, and how this is related to the notion of self-actualization. For Hegel, because self-determination requires completeness, the dialectic of self-actualization in spirit's development into the modern ethical life places spirit itself in the role of the 'self' that is to be actualized. Bhaskar's anthropological reinterpretation of this idea allows individuals to show up as the only loci of autonomy, the only selves in the system. Self-actualization, the actualization of the real nature of the individual, is nevertheless a *social* process rather than a merely individual one, not because the individual is a moment in spirit's self-development, but because individuals are *inherently relational* and are necessarily thrown into a material social totality of relationships in four-planar being. The individual's nature is to be related or dialectically connected with the non-identical world in four planes, material relations with nature, interpersonal relations with others, social structural relations, and internal relations to the self. Furthermore, such relations generate emergent social totalities, which themselves consist in holistic causal efficacy, and generally in contradictory internal relations between the individuals. On four planes, then, individual selves are existentially interdependent with non-identical others,

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<sup>77</sup> Bhaskar 1986/2009, 179.



and these relationships comprise sui generis emergent totalities, social wholes of various levels of specificity and completeness, that have their own causal powers and generate their own principles. The character of false necessities is then irreducibly relational, in that they consist in distorting relations between individuals, which are thus partly constitutive of those individuals.

### *7. Critical Dialectic: Dialectical Critique*

We can now see how this account of autonomy as implicit in the basic character of human being, given the various features of such an account, connects autonomy and self-actualization in such a way that *dialectical (explanatory) knowledge (or truth) is implicated in the achievement of freedom*. We can see, that is, how it is that the nature of human being means that the ontological development of freedom, the actualization of autonomy in the world, can be dependent on dialectical critique (Bhaskar's 'critical dialectic') of dialectically contradictory social forms that generate false necessities. Now Bhaskar does not provide a very detailed substantive dialectical critique of the modern world – this is not his aim. But he specifies *how* dialectical critique works and how it is connected to the possibility of actualizing freedom. The basic idea is that a dialectical critique seeks to trace an antagonism, error or failure of some kind to its ground in a dialectical contradiction. Social practices are meaning-laden affairs, to the extent that we can understand any practice as being intrinsically or dialectically related with (and partly existentially constituted by) a conceptual frame of reference. Capitalist production, for example, would not be the practice it is in the absence of a set of concept-dependent forms – capital, labour, wages, value, exchange, price, profit. Marx's thesis in *Capital* is that these forms, though intrinsically related to and constitutive of capitalist production, are false to the practice, as well as to human nature. That is to say, they are necessary and yet necessarily false – *false necessities*. And we saw that false necessities constitute an alienation of the individual from her real nature. Practices that are necessarily sustained by false beliefs, such as false forms, categorical errors, fetishism, reification, etc., form a barrier to the individual's autonomy, for practice informed by false beliefs cannot remove constraints on self-actualization, and cannot bring about the kingdom of autonomy in the world. A dialectical explanatory critique aims to identify the false belief, to locate it within the practice that explains (the need for) that false belief, and to explain the dialectical contradiction that sustains this practice. Once an explanation of a false necessity is proffered in terms of the dialectical contradiction that grounds it (and perhaps of some further dialectical ground of that contradiction itself), possibilities for transformative agentive practice can be imagined and elaborated. For once the causal ground of a (false) causal constraint (dialectical contradiction) is understood, the possibility for thinking about how it can be changed becomes a real one.

In other words, dialectical critique such as would further the prospects of emancipation in practice needs to expose socially (and psychologically) embedded false beliefs, and to explain these false beliefs in terms of the practices they sustain, and the structural grounds of those practices. Typically, contradictory practices (ones that are sustained by false beliefs which discursively constitute and sustain them) impose on agents the need to find a 'compromise' in order to cope with the practical indeterminacy they generate. That is, in order for a practice rooted in contradiction to persist it will generally require buttressing by

compromise ideologies. These typically conceal the real nature of things by, for example, (mis)representing the particular as universal, or universal as particular. Ideologies represent a particular possible object of dialectical critique. Paradigmatic examples are philosophical and theoretical ideologies, including positivism in philosophy, classical political economy in economics, or the socially affirmative cognitive psychology that has largely displaced Freud's more radical psychoanalysis. In the case of ideology, dialectical critique would be at once an immanent critique of a theory, showing it to be incoherent, a critique of the practice that the theory sustains, showing the conceptual frame of reference of that practice to be false and necessary (and thus showing the practice to be dialectically contradictory), and a critique of the generative structures that sustain the practice.

Given the anthropological conditions outlined, such a dialectical critique is clearly different from the mature Hegel's critical dialectic. In PhR, recall, the critical dialectic can only recapitulate what has already been ontologically guaranteed. The characteristic move in a dialectical critique for Hegel is to show that a practice is contradictory, but then to show that from a higher or more complete standpoint it is, after all, not contradictory. This is because the ontological dialectic onto which the critical dialectic is laminated has already secured the overall reconciliation, so that it would not make sense within the Hegelian perspective for dialectic to reveal a fundamental, unresolved contradiction. Yet, this means that for Hegel contradictions are only ever *apparent*. For Bhaskar, on the other hand, having distinguished the ontological and critical dialectics, contradictions are not only real but are paradigmatically not resolvable in theory at all. Dialectical critique is a cognitive and practical dialectic at the same time grounded in anthropological conditions, constellationally situated within the ontological dialectic, which seeks to understand and explain real dialectical contradictions and to inform and motivate practical change as the motor of the dialectical development of freedom.

### *8. Freedom and Concrete Utopianism*

Bhaskar's concrete utopianism is an attempt to imaginatively and tentatively explore the dialectical implications of the most narrowly conceived actual forms of freedom, and show that they presuppose social conditions that are yet to be actualized. For Hegel, concrete utopia is *already actualized*, in that the idea of freedom is actual in the world rather than being a mere ought. For Bhaskar, as we have seen, freedom is both real and not necessarily actual. This means that for Bhaskar the actuality of freedom is an unknown quantity: we can only imagine, in ways informed by our criticism of the present, the necessary social and relational conditions for a full actualization of individual freedom (outside of which individual freedom is always a partial and contradictory abstraction). The conception of freedom is differentiated so as to show how it is both presupposed in the rudimentary structure of desirous agency in a non-identical world, and how it entails a 'positive generalization', broadening what is implied by rational agency into a 'concrete utopian' account of the conditions necessary for the completion of autonomy. Bhaskar follows the tradition of idealism in understanding freedom as, at its core, *autonomy*,<sup>78</sup> and autonomy as *self-determination*.<sup>79</sup> But he argues that autonomy itself presupposes much more than the

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<sup>78</sup> DPF, 260.

<sup>79</sup> DPF, 281.

base level concept of agency, claiming that agency can be, and indeed, in a world of master–slave relations, generally is lacking autonomy. The lower, more basic levels of freedom<sup>80</sup> can be seen as partial abstractions of elements of autonomy from the full conditions that would be required for autonomy to be actual. At the other end of such a dialectic, autonomy is ‘positively generalized’ into a universalization of autonomy, and to the eventual utopian concept of ‘universal human flourishing, or the eudaimonistic society’.<sup>81</sup> But this is an imaginative projection into an unknown future, the realist counterpart to the mature Hegel’s already realized, though only speculatively appreciable, utopia.

Autonomy for Bhaskar is clearly understood as ‘rational autonomy’, but the role that rationality plays in autonomy is irreducible to the sense in which any agency is ‘rational’. It involves not merely being able to act on reasons, to take reasons *as* reasons, but to discern the real reasons given in one’s nature, a capability that will ‘incorporate cognitive, empowered and dispositional or motivational aspects’.<sup>82</sup> The sense in which prior or external causes prevent autonomy is that in which they block off the responsiveness of the self to real reasons. Insofar as they are ills in the sense in which Bhaskar has elaborated this concept, they are also forms of alienation, ‘falsehoods to concretely singularized human nature’,<sup>83</sup> and since this alienation is the estrangement of the self from something essential to her, and so a falsehood, it becomes possible to see how such a situation could be described as a lack of genuine self-determination. Such a situation, in which the individual is subject to false necessities is, because these necessities are false to the individual’s nature, a form of splitting off of the individual from her real or essential self. In other words, ‘to be alienated is to lose part of one’s autonomy’,<sup>84</sup> and this can make sense if constraints, which are false necessities, are forms in which the self is subjected to necessities that are untrue to their real nature.

This connection between autonomy and alienation explains why ‘nothing which was reified ... could be said to be truly autonomous’.<sup>85</sup> This sense of autonomy, however, will not be actual wherever actual four-planar being is structured by ‘discursively moralized ... generalized master–slave relations’,<sup>86</sup> i.e. false necessities. Thus while autonomy involves the rational capacity to act on reasons, and so to determine oneself, it also presupposes that one is not alienated from one’s real self, one’s essential nature. That is, self-determination would involve the capacity to determine oneself according to one’s true self, that is, one’s real nature, and this would involve the absence of the sort of alienations that are generated by the constitutive splits of master–slave relations and false necessity; that is, ‘a genuine self-determination’<sup>87</sup> would only be possible in a situation ‘in which it could be said that each was *true to, of and for themselves*’.<sup>88</sup> That autonomy is the negation of alienation links rationality with our nature, where being rational, and thus self-determining, means being at the same time ‘with oneself’ in the use of one’s rationality, that is, really

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<sup>80</sup> ‘Agentive freedom’ and ‘formal legal freedoms’ (see DPF, 282).

<sup>81</sup> DPF, 284.

<sup>82</sup> DPF, 260

<sup>83</sup> DPF, 281.

<sup>84</sup> DPF, 114.

<sup>85</sup> DPF, 281.

<sup>86</sup> DPF, 120.

<sup>87</sup> DPF, 278.

<sup>88</sup> DPF, 120.

being oneself and thus responding to one's real (four-planar relational) nature. This will depend on having the appropriate responsiveness to one's own nature, and since one's own nature is relational and so inherently social, autonomy would require the appropriate responsiveness to real four-planar human nature in both its universality and 'concrete singularity', that is, its uniqueness in the concrete individual. Freedom, in the sense of autonomy, would involve the self's determination of oneself according to what one truly is. If the self is relationally constituted, then the task of becoming true to oneself is not an individual matter, but would involve changing the shape of the social world practically. So Bhaskar considers the conditions for rational autonomy to be non-actual because modern societies are dominated by false necessities, which are forms of alienation and so absences of autonomy, ways in which individuals in the modern world are unable to be true to themselves and so to truly determine themselves in accordance with their real nature. The forms of alienation that are generated by social actuality are blocks to rational autonomy because they are blocks to our ability to act on our real nature. Not only do forms of alienation stop us being responsive to our real nature and the reasons it gives us, but the structural distortion of the actual world of master–slave relations also blocks us practically.

In turn, 'self-determination is normally a necessary condition for *self-realization*'.<sup>89</sup> 'Self-realization', then, is to be understood as a separate, though related, sense of freedom, one that is systematically related to autonomy in that it presupposes autonomy as a condition. At the level of self-realization, freedom is **understood** as 'the realization of concretely singularized possibilities for development',<sup>90</sup> in which freedom is comprehended as 'flourishing' and 'universal human flourishing',<sup>91</sup> which presuppose a eudaimonistic society. At this point, a concrete utopia is postulated. This is not 'a historicist enterprise of anticipating the trajectory of a future yet to be caused',<sup>92</sup> but an articulation of a possible direction of history, considering the conatus to freedom implicit in four-planar human being and the possibility that what it implies could be realized. In such a concrete utopian 'eudaimonistic society', individual possibilities for flourishing, development and self-realization would be **fully** actualized in a relational world that thoroughly nurtures individual autonomy as its condition, and in which the freedom and flourishing of each depends on that of every other,<sup>93</sup> cementing the universality and reciprocity inherent in a relational and totalized conception of human being. This could be achieved not by reinterpreting freedom to accommodate our institutions, but only by transforming institutions to accommodate human freedom. The experience of desire is the experience of need, and in the referential detachment, implicit in this experience, of the reality of needs and their grounds. In this elemental experience, then, self-determination is revealed as an aspiration intimately connected with the individual's real nature. But this experience also reveals our *dependence on others*, and thus gives rise to the most basic experience of the connection between autonomy and *solidarity*, a theme that allows Bhaskar to develop freedom into a substantively ethical conception that is implicitly universal.

In concrete utopianism, this conception is elaborated imaginatively in an open-ended way, in an attempt to offer realistic ideals that can inspire practice. Bhaskar's concrete

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<sup>89</sup> DPF, 281, my emphasis.

<sup>90</sup> DPF, 280.

<sup>91</sup> DPF, 281.

<sup>92</sup> DPF, 279.

<sup>93</sup> DPF, 283-4.

utopianism is not unique – it follows in a tradition of attempts to imaginatively think a better future. What he tries to show is that concrete utopianism has an important place as part of the philosophical and social scientific project of critical theory, and that it needn't be idle speculation or dogmatic prescription. By reflecting on the necessary conditions of the most basic aspects of human nature as we know it – desire, need, communication, trust – in a way that is informed by a proper account of relational, historical human nature (four-planar social being), we can unfold the real but non-actual conditions of a fuller and freer social being. This is speculation, but it is not idle or dogmatic. It is not idle because it is grounded in a realistic philosophical anthropology and guided by the 'logic of dialectical universalizability', which is to say a form of realist quasi-transcendental argument. And it is not dogmatic because it does not claim any particular authority – it is meant merely as a suggestive image of a social life that more realistically answers to the needs of human being.

## 9. Philosophy and the Realist Idea of Freedom

To conclude, I want to outline how Bhaskar's realist dialectical conception of freedom compares to three prominent philosophical accounts of freedom.

Firstly, Kant, who is unable 'to sustain the concept of freedom, or even causal agency'.<sup>94</sup> The traditional problems in the philosophy of freedom 'all stem from *de-agentification* via disembodiment or disintentionality',<sup>95</sup> that is, with a tendency either to abstract the intentionality of agency from the material world ('free will') or to construct a picture of the embodied world that leaves out the causal participation of intentional practical activity. Kant's transcendental idealism, of course, best illustrates these tendencies by simultaneously positing *both* the disembodiment of agency (in noumenal free will) *and* the disintentionality of agency (in a phenomenal determinism in which agency plays no causally irreducible part), and thus doubly de-agentifies human being.<sup>96</sup> Because Kant assumes the antiquated actualist account of natural order entailing regularity determinism, underpinned by a Humean account of constant conjunction, he is forced to place "'free man" outside it'. That is, 'it is his phenomenal (Humean) empirical realism which necessitates his noumenal (Leibnizian) transcendent realism'.<sup>98</sup>

On a realist, i.e. non-identitarian, ontology, however, embodied agency can be 'included in the system in which human beings act', and 'concrete utopianism in this life would replace the after-life'.<sup>99</sup> Bhaskar, in refusing to place the self in the noumenal or intelligible domain, outside of the order of necessity, thus refuses to see freedom as an all-or-nothing, yes-or-no question to be answered by metaphysics. Instead, freedom is understood as a function of our rational responsiveness to our real nature, and this involves seeing that our selves are potentially alienated, blocked and obscured in actual historical life. Furthermore, where Kant understands desire as heteronomous, Bhaskar insists that desire contains the conatus of freedom, but shows why Kant might have thought desire to be heteronomous: because under the sway of false necessity, desires often will be heteronomous to our real

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<sup>94</sup> DPF, 323.

<sup>95</sup> DPF, 278, original emphasis.

<sup>96</sup> See the 'Third Antinomy' in Kant 1929.

<sup>98</sup> DPF, 323.

<sup>99</sup> DPF, 324.

axiologically understood nature. Freedom is then neither to be thought of as determination according to a noumenal self that cannot interact with the world of necessity, nor of simply blindly following natural inclinations, but of reconciling our reason and nature in rationally informed practice, 'hence the connection between autonomy, functioning as a theoretic-practical dual concept potentially linking truth to freedom, and the ... coherence of theory and practice in practice'.<sup>100</sup>

Now for Marx. Given that autonomy for Bhaskar is understood in a distinctive double sense as both 'self-determination' and 'being true to and of oneself', it is clear that part of Bhaskar's innovation is to link the intuition underlying, but betrayed in, idealist notions of freedom with Marx's naturalistic idea. Clearly autonomy, if it depends on the actualization of our real relational nature, is connected to Marx's thought that we can be alienated from our real nature. However, Bhaskar's conception of our nature, his anthropology, is considerably more differentiated than Marx's. The basic model of the forms in which the individual can be relationally alienated from their real self is the account of alienation of species-being in Marx's early *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, in which he articulates a gap between human nature in capitalism and human nature in communism, only the latter of which can be considered true and free.<sup>101</sup> This account of alienation, Norrie writes,

lies at the core of what Bhaskar calls an original 'generative separation' under modern conditions. This is the basic fivefold split that begins with the alienation of the immediate producers from their labour, its product and the means of production. This core form spawns alienation across the four planes of human being ... leading to alienation 'from oneself'.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, 'from Marx, Bhaskar finds a structural explanation of the nature of alienation in modern society',<sup>103</sup> as characterized by generalized master-slave relations, and their consequent false necessities and compromise ideologies. In this relational context, individuals are split off from their true character or nature and in the process subject to determination by false necessities that deprive them of autonomy, that is, their ability to truly determine themselves. Marx's point in characterizing species-being as free is a counter-factual one: his point is to 'show that alienated activity is not free',<sup>104</sup> and that this is the character of activity under modern conditions. Following Marx, Bhaskar then is distinguishing between the actual nature of human being, and the deep anthropological reality of humanity. This also presupposes a more basic level at which our nature is common to both contexts, a 'kind of lowest common denominator, or those qualities which all men ... share just because they are men'.<sup>105</sup> But whereas Marx's understanding of this lowest common denominator is fairly unclear, and appears to be fairly minimal, stating that human activity is conscious and rational,<sup>106</sup> Bhaskar's anthropology distinguishes between the conditions of any social being, given in the ontological and anthropological conditions of non-identity, absence, four-planar relational totality, and embodied agency, and the diverse and changing actuality of such relational embodied being.

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<sup>100</sup> DPF, 281.

<sup>101</sup> Marx 1977, 82-3.

<sup>102</sup> Norrie 2010, 112; see DPF, 168.

<sup>103</sup> Norrie 2010, 112.

<sup>104</sup> Ollman 1976, 110.

<sup>105</sup> Ollman 1976, 110.

<sup>106</sup> Ollman 1976, 112.

Bertell Ollman has noted that while 'the essence of man's life activity in communism is freedom',<sup>107</sup> it is unclear what place freedom can have in the actual world of modern conditions. This is because for Ollman, Marx seems to understand freedom as self-realization. On the other hand, George Brenkert has traced a notion of freedom in Marx as self-determination, rejecting the claim that Marx held a self-realization view as being textually unlikely and philosophically overdemanding.<sup>108</sup> Rather, Marx should be understood as incorporating within a naturalistic account of self-determination the development of capacities and satisfaction of needs. In the context of this debate, Bhaskar's differentiated conception of freedom, as we have seen, allots a place for the concretely utopian conception of freedom as universal self-realization, in which the individual's potentials for development are given full expression in a eudaimonistic world, while emphasizing that this is a development of the notion of self-determination which it presupposes, dialectically constellating self-determination as a narrower form of self-realization, the latter being the condition of the full actualization of the former.

We must finish where we started, with Hegel. As we have seen, Bhaskar opposes Hegel's attempt to reconcile freedom and fate, which involves him in an attempt to show that the conditions for individual freedom, autonomy, are already actualized under modern conditions. This argument, we saw, relied on a background *ontological* dialectic in which spirit self-actualizes in the world, detaching self-actualization from the autonomous individual and attributing it to a spiritual 'self'. The meta-subject 'spirit' is understood *to have actualized itself* through the automatic functioning of a system of interaction between individuals caught in social struggle, guided by particularity, and unaware of the role they play in the development of concrete freedom.<sup>109</sup> Hegel's *critical* dialectic proceeds to demonstrate through the 'analytical reinstatement in dialectical connection'<sup>110</sup> of apparent contradictions, to the reconciliation to the actual state of affairs which, as the 'speculatively rational transfigurative result',<sup>111</sup> no longer appears contradictory. Contradictions, for Hegel, disappear once their dialectical connection is appreciated from the standpoint of reason, but this has the effect of leaving the antagonisms in place, transfigured but not transformed. This is because the conditions for partial forms of freedom are guaranteed in advance to be already actualized by the ontological dialectic of spirit. Thus, Bhaskar interprets PhR as

a progressive compounding of Tina compromise upon Tina compromise, until in the self-realization of the absolute idea and the final overcoming of its self-compromise, in the absolute spirit ... we achieve at once absolute clarity and absolute compromise.<sup>112</sup>

In contrast, Bhaskar resists any speculative reconciliation to the existing state of affairs. For once the possibility of false necessities is situated, there is no reason to expect history to accord with real rather than false necessity. Bhaskar, like Hegel, differentiates different levels of freedom linking to their necessary social conditions. But where Hegel understands freedom as the *Idea*, the essence of human spirit conceived as a self-referential totality, in

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<sup>107</sup> Ollman 1976, 118.

<sup>108</sup> This is in part a criticism of Ollman's interpretation (Brenkert 1983, 95-6).

<sup>109</sup> The exception to this is the 'world-historical individual' discussed in the 'Introduction' to *The Philosophy of History*.

<sup>110</sup> DPF, 327.

<sup>111</sup> DPF, 195.

<sup>112</sup> DPF, 118.

Bhaskar this is transformed in a naturalistic discourse as *real human nature*, changing four-planar social being, situated in the context of historical actuality. The false necessities that dialectical criticism can uncover create limits on the actualization of autonomy since they mark ways in which the relational structure of the self alienates individuals from their real nature. Thus, self-actualization is not reduced to an automatic process, but instead the achievement of autonomy is understood in an anthropological dialectic that necessarily involves emancipatory axiology.

Could Bhaskar's position also be construed as an attempt to make good on Hegel's thought that freedom would depend on finding ourselves 'at home with [ourselves] in the other'?<sup>113</sup> Hegel's attempt to find freedom in the other miscarried because he was committed to a conception of freedom as self-referentiality (inherited from Fichte) and an actualist view of necessity (inherited from Hume via Kant), and thus identity. For Hegel this depends on a conception of spirit, the organicism of which can be traced back to Herder and Schiller.<sup>114</sup> Only on those premises does the project of reconciliation entail identifying freedom and fate. Bhaskar's dialectical philosophical anthropology reconfigures the idea in naturalistic terms, and suggests how we might come to find ourselves at home in the other, where the other means both our nature and our social thrownness. Since human being is relational on four distinct and related planes, there are four potential sources of otherness which we may hope to find ourselves at home in (nature, other people, society, our own internal nature), which means that Bhaskar's account is also able to integrate possible sources of otherness that eluded Hegel – especially those psychic sources outlined by psychoanalysis. But in order to be able to find ourselves in the other in practice rather than merely in speculative reason, we have to work on it – self-actualization is not an automatic process to be entrusted to spirit – and through dialectical critique and emancipatory practice transform our relations in such ways as to emancipate ourselves from false necessities and find ourselves freely in those relations. And although the actualization of freedom would require the transformation of existing relations, the anthropological status of relationality is itself a condition both of the non-actuality and the possibility of actualizing freedom. To find oneself in the other, then, is to find one's real essence *in one's relation to the other*, a relation that necessarily presupposes the constitutive non-identity as well as the mutually constitutive inter-relationality, of each concrete individual with each other, society, inner and outer nature. Overcoming alienation would depend not on seeing that the other is really identical, as a moment of a self-referring totality, but on practically shaping in a reciprocal way one's relation to the other so that it accords with the real relational nature of each.

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<sup>113</sup> Hegel 1991b, s. 94.

<sup>114</sup> See Rosen 1996, 133-145.



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