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RECLAIMING METAPHYSICAL TRUTH FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

by ROBERT ARCHER

ABSTRACT: It is not uncommon in educational research and social science in general either to eschew the word truth or to put it in scare quotes in order to signify scepticism about it. After the initial wave of relativism in the philosophy of natural science, a second wave has developed in social science with the rise of postmodernism and poststructuralism. The tendency here is to relativise truth or to bracket out questions of truth. In contradistinction, this paper revindicates the metaphysical nature of truth. Truth is a transcendental precondition of educational inquiry and is best understood as a formal, regulative norm. Realism about truth enjoins a defence of the correspondence theory, which is provided here. At the same time, however, the development of realism in the social sciences has ironically followed the postmodernists in its scepticism about truth and its rejection of the correspondence theory. This paper critically appraises such recent developments, since all research is unintelligible without realism about the social world and whether our substantive knowledge-claims correspond with it.

Keywords: truth, correspondence theory, ontology, realism, relativism

1. INTRODUCTION

The rationale behind writing this paper is in part defensive. Just over a decade ago, realists wrote books with titles like *Reclaiming Reality* (Bhaskar, 1989) and *Reality at Risk* (Trigg, 1989). More recently, some have been compelled to reclaim Humanity itself (Archer, 2000), which is indeed at risk. Well, at least in academic circles, 'where strident voices would dissolve the human being into discursive structures and humankind into a disembodied textualism. Outside of Academia, ordinary people act in undemolished fashion – they confront the world, meaning nature and practice . . .' (Archer, 2000, p. 2). Equally, I would add that such ordinary people function with a metaphysical definition of truth. Or, rather, they could not function without it. Truth is a precondition for learning and language-use.

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The ordinary definition of truth is metaphysical because it is congruent with realism about the external world, that is, that the world exists independently of our conception of it. As Bhaskar argues, 'it is in virtue of its world-reporting meaning that truth-talk satisfies a transcendental-axiological need, acting as a steering mechanism for language-users to find their way about the world' (1994, pp. 62–63).

However, both the metaphysical definition of truth and truth *qua* regulative norm have come increasingly under attack in educational research (as in social science in general). For example, Elizabeth Atkinson writes:

The postmodern challenge . . . has existed outside the educational field for many years, but has brought its focus to bear for at least the past decade, for example in the work of Cherryholmes (1988), Ball (1990, 1995), Nespor and Barber (1991), Lather (1991, 1993), Sanger (1994, 1995) and Stronach and MacLure (1997). These theorists, and others, challenge us to rethink our approach to both education and research, and to question the certainty with which to set out to seek the truth . . . With Ball (1995, p. 268), I would wish to propose 'a model of the educational theorist as a cultural critic offering perspective rather than truth . . .' (Atkinson, 2000, p. 327).

It is precisely such denigration (or rejection) of truth by education researchers that led David Bridges to defend the pursuit of truth in educational research. As he puts it:

I am prompted to engage in this discussion by, in particular, my experience of recent educational conferences in which I have observed, among the majority of more pedestrian contributions . . . an increasing number of (often interesting) papers in which the notion of 'truth' (or 'Truth') is referred to in inverted commas . . . *or* claims to the truth of beliefs are denied in favour of, for example, some kind of theory of political dominance or multiple subjectivities; *or* the very notion of the truth of beliefs is assumed under some apparent orthodoxy to be already ruled out of court. Such standpoints are in some but by no means all cases associated with a declared 'postmodernist' stance (Bridges, 1999, pp. 597–598, original emphases).

Equally, at the September 2000 British Educational Research Association's (BERA) conference, at Cardiff University, I was surprised that academic papers were presented *pro et contra* truth. When I suggested to one presenter that propositions instantiate truth (or falsity) and

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proffered the proposition that 'there is an empty can of diet coke in front of me', she replied that she was not interested in cans of diet coke! I also suggested that to criticise social practices and ideas as ideological presupposes truth. I was offered no satisfactory rejoinder. Of course, that the presenter was not interested in cans of diet coke was a separate matter: like Bridges, I was trying simply to make clear that we cannot dispense with the pursuit of truth in educational research. For

[w]ithout a strong and ever-present sense of truth-seeking, along with a recognition that truth is very hard to find, inquiry becomes impossible, and academia becomes little more than a forum for political whim and fancy (Bailey, 2001, p. 170).¹

I am sure that Ball *et al.* do not view their work in terms of political whim and fancy. Yet Bailey's transcendental² defence of truth underpinning educational inquiry enjoins that such charges will ever be prosecuted until such 'cultural critics offering perspective' properly put their cards on the table and make truth-claims about educational policy and practice. But, of course, 'offering perspective' is a back-door way of making truth-claims. Academic discourse is simply unintelligible without it and any claim to the contrary removes the rationale for such 'critical perspective-making'. Why else do so many of us lament the deleterious impact of managerialism on children's learning? It is not so much a question of why but of *how*: our capacity to provide an explanatory critique of managerialism derives from the nature of social reality and its correspondence with our substantive knowledge-claims.

Now, we do need to pause a moment, for this paper's foray into social realism, truth and the correspondence theory might well be viewed by some as unnecessarily recondite, that is, 'too' philosophical and/or social scientific.³ Pring (2000, p. 158) maintains that research into educational practice cannot simply be a branch of the social sciences, though adds that the social sciences provide tools for the educational researcher. Moreover, he writes that '... in resisting the social sciences, so have educational researchers questioned the relevance of notions such as 'truth', 'knowledge', 'objectivity', 'reality', 'causality'. In this I believe they are mistaken and have caused much harm ...' (Pring, 2000, p. 159). There are two points to be made here. First, whilst an excessive preoccupation with metaphysics would understandably warrant dismissal by some because of its lack of practical import, all educational research makes ontological assumptions about the social world, explicitly or implicitly.⁴ In the case of the metaphysics of truth, especially the correspondence theory,

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the need to grapple with the complexity of the debate is crucial precisely because the very concept of research, as Pring immediately adds, is unintelligible without it. Second, such harm is not simply 'academic': the pursuit of social justice presupposes truth. Indeed, our ineluctably moral endeavours to assess the 'politics of the possible' are unintelligible without it.

As Bhaskar argues (1989, p. 1), we need to take philosophy seriously because it underwrites what constitutes science and knowledge and which political practices are deemed legitimate. What needs to be taken seriously here is the metaphysical nature of truth and the correspondence theory. As Pring puts it, there is an 'inevitable correspondence between what is said and what *is*, even if that correspondence is not of the simplistic kind outlined in 'picture theory of meaning'. Realism and accounts of reality and truth are inseparable, and failure to recognize that leads to strange and indefensible consequences in the theory and practice of research' (2000, p. 74, original emphasis). However, not all realists accept the correspondence theory of truth. It will be argued that such theorists confuse or conflate truth with the processes and mechanisms involved in its instantiation. It is precisely because we cannot avoid realism in educational research that the inconsistencies and confusions within the social realist corpus itself be scrutinised and ironed out.

2. TRUTH: METAPHYSICAL OR EPISTEMIC?

As Jubien (1997) notes, philosophers have proposed many different analyses and characterisations of truth, which tend to be either epistemic or metaphysical. On the metaphysical view, truth is a property that can only be instantiated by propositions. True propositions are those that correspond with reality ('it is true that the can of diet coke is in front of me'). As Jubien notes, truth is a *relational* property of the propositions that instantiate it:

Because propositions are mind-independent entities, and because the world is, in general, independent of our minds, whether a given proposition is true has nothing to do with whether anyone knows it, believes it, has any evidence for it, or any justification for believing it or asserting it, etc. In other words, this notion of truth has no epistemic content whatsoever. It's strictly a matter between the proposition and the world. (1997, pp. 79–80)

This is not to suggest that some propositions do not concern epistemic matters. The point is that the truth (or falsity) of such propositions is independent of whether anyone knows it, believes it or has

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evidence for it. On some epistemic views, truth may also be seen as a property, but not a property of propositions. Rather, it would be a property of sentences. Other epistemic views treat truth as a relation between sentences and some other entities, e.g. coherence theory of truth, where truth is relation between coherent sets of beliefs or theories, and not something independent of such beliefs or theories. The consensus theory treats truth as a relation between theories or beliefs and groups.⁵

Now, as Jubien reminds us, if we think about how we actually use the words 'true' and 'truth' in everyday life, it is clear that we use them overwhelmingly in accordance with the metaphysical conception. Indeed, as he rightly argues, in our practical affairs, we always separate questions of truth from questions of belief or justification or acceptance. Crucially, then, none of the epistemic concepts 'can possibly be a correct analysis of the concept of truth, because that concept is non-epistemic at its source' (Jubien, 1997, p. 82).

3. TRUTH: IF NOT EPISTEMIC, THEN RELATIVE?

The consensus theory enjoins that truth is *relative* to the say-so of a group (or nation). Relativism is a familiar part of the social science and educational landscape. As one delegate at the BERA conference remarked in response to Richard Pring's contribution, truth 'belongs' to specific (in this case, ethnic) groups. In other words, 'we' have our truths and 'they' have theirs. This is a classic endorsement of relativism about truth. In clarifying what is meant by 'truth is relative', Jubien recommends that we consider a familiar analogous claim from physics:

No object is *absolutely* at rest (or absolutely in motion). An object can only be *relatively* at rest (or relatively in motion). Every object is at rest *relative to* (or *with respect to*, etc.) some reference frames and in motion relative to others. (Jubien, 1997, p. 83)

This is the doctrine of relativity: being at rest and being in motion are not properties of things; the concepts of rest and motion are *relations* that hold between objects and reference frames. As he points out, this is no different with truth, or with any other concept that is claimed to be relative: 'When we say that a given proposition is *true*, it sounds like we're just saying that a certain thing, the proposition, has a certain property, the property of *being true*' (1997, p. 84, original emphasis). Relativism, in contrast, is the view that being true is not a property, but a relation between the proposition and something else. Almost invariably that something else is a person, a culture or

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conceptual scheme. The pressing question for realists like myself is why people, particularly students, are attracted to relativism.⁶ Andrew Sayer argues that the most common motive among students is a fear that accepting the possibility of distinguishing truth from falsity will require one to pronounce the beliefs of others as false.

Relativism appears to have the virtue of being egalitarian and open-minded, avoiding implications that others are 'falsely conscious'. Even if one rejects an absolutist view of truth and proposes, as I have done, that absolute truth is either meaningless or unattainable, but that one can nevertheless distinguish better from worse ideas, some relativists seem to find this unpalatable too . . . The principle of equality applies to the moral worth of persons, not to the epistemological status of their empirical beliefs . . . (Sayer, 2000, p. 48)

Of course, in order to distinguish 'better' from 'worse' ideas presupposes metaphysical truth! Confusion can readily be dispelled here. Confusion about the doctrine of absolutism can easily arise because the terms 'absolute' and 'absolutely' are ambiguous – we often use these terms to convey certainty or to claim knowledge (Jubien, 1997). However, the doctrine of absolutism is simply the claim that truth is a property of propositions rather than a relation between propositions and entities. It is not concerned with knowledge, belief, conviction or certainty.

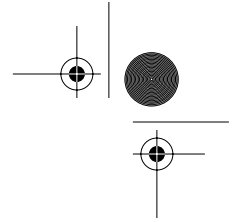
Perhaps, then, authors like Atkinson are concerned to eschew arrogant over-confidence in their truth-claims. Or, indeed, they do not wish to *impose* in papal-like fashion substantive knowledge-claims on others. Whilst this is entirely laudable, we must not lose sight of the fact that fallibility presupposes metaphysical truth and vice versa (if we can never be right, then we can never be wrong). It seems to me that some writers have (consistently) eschewed truth precisely because it is argued, wrongly, that certainty is an impossible fancy. However, the real problem arises when it is argued that we can *never* be certain, or sure, or 'absolute' about the truth status of our substantive knowledge-claim(s). For example, Hammersley, as we have seen (see note 4), underscores a realist approach to educational research. But he vitiates the realist enterprise when he adds that ' . . . true knowledge is true by virtue of the fact that it corresponds to the phenomena it is intended to represent (though, as I indicated, we can never be *certain* that any knowledge claim is true)' (1992, p. 51, original emphasis). If this were the case, then one wonders whether Hammersley would, for example, be prepared to visit a friend in hospital upon receiving a call confirming that 'yes, it is

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true that your friend has been taken to hospital'. To elevate uncertainty into an all-engulfing epistemological normative procedure is a recipe for disaster (and cannot eschew the slippery slope of relativism, notwithstanding Hammersley's attachment to ontological realism).

Hammersley's position is technically referred to as fallibilism in philosophy (which is not to be confused with fallibility). Here, any theory or belief may be false. In essence, according to fallibilism, nothing about the world can be known for certain: no amount or quality of empirical confirmation or disconfirmation is sufficient to guarantee truth or falsity. Fallibilism is consistent with realism, but insists that human beings are epistemologically limited to the extent that they can never be sure whether they have in fact attained truth-status for their propositions. However, as Fay (1996) rightly points out, can realism remain persuasive once a fallibilist approach is adopted? Ineluctably, it expunges the rationale for any type of research. In contradistinction, we must recognise that our fallibility does not mean that we can never be right: some of our knowledge is true (it is true at this moment in space-time that I am writing this paper). Exactly *how* much of our knowledge is not the issue.⁷ If it is assumed *a priori* that we can never be sure about whether our propositions correspond (or do not correspond) with certain states of affairs, then, to reiterate, the rug is removed from under the educational researcher's feet.

Indeed, it seems to me that relativism-cum-nihilism is the end result of fallibilism, since we can never know if we have in fact attained the truth. If we cannot know for sure that the payment-by-results system was inimical to children's learning, then what is the point of engaging in any form of critique underpinned by values that accord primacy to the welfare of children? Indeed, why bother critiquing the (new) managerialisation of education? It is easy to dispense with relativism about truth, since it involves a performative contradiction that, as Sayer (2000) notes, invites ridicule – 'there is no truth beyond whatever anyone defines as truth – and that's the truth!' In order to avoid the nihilist-cum-relativist morass, we must, along with Hammersley, separate ontology and epistemology and reaffirm our *fallibility* (as opposed to *fallibilism*). Indeed, the main challenge to relativism (in all its guises) has come from critical realism, whose chief proponent is Roy Bhaskar. Central here is (among other things) the distinction between a realm of intransitive objects, processes and events – i.e. those that must be taken to exist independently of human conceptualisation⁸ – and, on the other hand, a transitive realm of knowledge-constitutive interests that are subject to critical assessment. To conflate the intransitive and transitive realms



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is the cardinal error of relativist philosophies (Norris, 1994; Scott, 2000). As Norris notes, it also leads to disabling consequences in the ethical and socio-political spheres of enquiry.

Thus it relativises 'truth' (in the natural and human sciences alike) to whatever form of discourse – or *de facto* regime of instituted power/knowledge – happens to prevail in some given discipline at some given time. And it also undermines any critical questioning of scientific projects, investigations or research programmes for human individual and collective well-being. (1994, p. 160)

As Norris adds, Bhaskar's reason for his intransitive/transitive distinction derives from (a) the fact that it is a necessary condition of possibility for science, i.e., science would be unintelligible in the absence of a presupposed object-domain that is not simply a construct of our various schemes; and (b) the relativists err in confusing ontological and epistemological issues – they mistakenly hold ontology to be synonymous with epistemology.

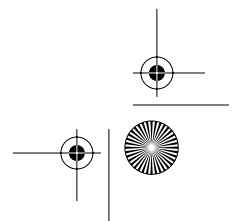
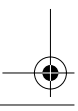
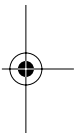
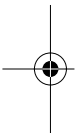
More recently, Bhaskar has undertaken to develop a theory of truth congruent with critical realist philosophy. In 1993 he introduced the concept of 'alethic truth'. With the exception of Ruth Groff (2000), Bhaskar's thinking about the concept of truth has received little explicit attention. The next section will address the serious inadequacies of Bhaskar's theorising about truth. Following Groff, it will be argued that there are ontological, epistemological and political reasons for rejecting Bhaskar's concept of 'alethic truth'. This is consistent with my reclamation of metaphysical truth for educational research and defence of correspondence.

4. ALETHIC TRUTH, PRACTICAL ADEQUACY AND CONCOMITANCE: BEYOND CORRESPONDENCE?

Bhaskar's 'Alethic Truth'

For Bhaskar, truth seems simultaneously (a) the simplest and (b) the most difficult of concepts. In relation to (a), he writes that:

Saying 'true' to a proposition is to give one's assent to it – this is its primary function, whereby redundancy and performative theories derive their plausibility. But one is thereby committed to a claim *about* the world, roughly to the effect that is how things are, from which correspondence theories since the time of Aristotle have drawn their currency . . . (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 214)



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However, in relation to (b), he writes: 'But "truth" is at the same time the most difficult of concepts in which . . . there is hardly an extant theory without some flaw but in which it is not hard to recognise some truth or power' (p. 215). In commenting upon the correspondence theory of truth, he notes that the basic objection to the most influential correspondence theories (the early Wittgenstein's picture theory, Tarski's semantic theory and Popper's theory of increasing truth-likeness) applies to all, namely that there is no 'Archimedean' standpoint from which a comparison of the competing items can be made. For Bhaskar, then, given the rejection of immediate knowledge, the recognition that matching is a metaphor and that semantic theories are homologous, 'it seems that correspondence theories must be abandoned' (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 215). Contrary to Bhaskar, it will be argued that his ostensible move away from correspondence to his notion of 'alethic truth' is fatally flawed: correspondence would do justice to critical realism understood as a theory of knowledge rather than as a theory of truth (Groff, 2000).

The equivocal nature of 'it *seems* that correspondence theories must be abandoned' is due to the fact that Bhaskar cannot dispense with correspondence in some form. I would suggest that it is not correspondence *per se* that is flawed, but rather some of the *forms* it has taken (hence the dismissal of Wittgenstein's 'picture theory', for example). He has asserted that alethic truth is 'a species of ontological truth constituting and following on the truth of, or real reason(s) for . . . things, as distinct from propositions' (Bhaskar, 1994, p. 251). This is clearly an extension of metaphysical truth, for now alethic truth is a predicate of things as distinct from propositions: it is an ontic rather than epistemic phenomenon. Alethic truths are the underlying processes, mechanisms and structured properties that both natural and social scientists seek to identify. Thus, for example, the alethic truth of a teacher's capacity to issue a detention is the causal structure of the school and its wider structural embedding. Many would (rightly) wish to query this: for could it not be that the teacher's capacity derives from other, equally important sources that may or may not be contingently related to the school *qua* structure? The language of alethic truth is problematic and must be rejected for three reasons.

First, and fundamentally, there is the ontological objection. Essentially, it is improper to equate truth with states of affairs: while they are related they are not the same sort of thing. In his earlier work, Groff notes that Bhaskar (rightly) insisted that ideas are not to be mistaken for underlying causal mechanisms. As she notes, in his *Realist Theory of Science* (1978), truth belongs on the epistemological side

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of an epistemology/ontology divide. (Remember that truth is metaphysical and not epistemic, though Groff's argument that truth is not to be conflated or confused with the intransitive dimension is correct.) For Groff, the issue is how one is to register the complaint that, by identifying truth with causality, Bhaskar has committed a category error. She suggests (Groff, 2000, p. 412) that the way to proceed is to ask, 'What sound reason(s) might there be, if any, to assume that truth is not purely ideational, and to therefore regard as legitimate the use of the term to refer to generative mechanisms?' Before addressing this question, however, two points need to be made. First, alethic truth is an inherently equivocal concept peculiar in that while it designates ontic phenomena (e.g. education system), its use in any given instance enjoins that certain epistemic conditions have been met, i.e. agreed on as being the real reason for some given phenomenon (Groff, 2000, p. 413). Second, Bhaskar has not rejected the idea that other kinds of truth may pertain to the evaluation of propositions, which brings us back to metaphysical truth (i.e. relational property). The issue, then, is whether truth should be extended to incorporate material causality. Now, in terms of whether there may be sound reasons to refer to generative mechanisms as truths, Bhaskar has in fact not provided *any* reasons, sound or otherwise. It is simply an assertion. At the end of the day, the term alethic truth itself 'tells us only, and only indirectly, that we must already have come to certain epistemic conclusions. Far from authorising such judgements, it presupposes that they have already been made on grounds which the concept of alethic truth does not itself specify' (Groff, 2000, p. 415).

The second reason is that epistemologically the concept of alethic truth makes it seem as though issues of justification and of theory preference have been resolved. In fact, there is an absence of explicit discussion of justification in Bhaskar's work. For Groff, alethic truth is a substitute for the intransitive realm in authorising judgmental rationality, which is wholly inadequate. Instead, adequate theorising of judgmental rationality is urgently required.

The third is that politically (although, as Groff notes, the issues are epistemic) it will be more likely that critical realism will be mistaken for a form of epistemological hubris. Instead, Bhaskar would be well advised to return to his earlier acceptance of fallibility (in the transitive realm of activity and knowledge production). Indeed, the claim that truth is grounded in things is to commit the ontic fallacy. Truth is a concept that refers us to states of affairs and, quite simply, our predicative practices are unintelligible without a notion of things either being or not being the case.

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Now, it would make sense to develop my defence of correspondence at this juncture. However, it is important briefly to look at how leading critical social realists wrestle with truth, since there is an all-too-hasty rejection of both truth *qua* regulative norm and correspondence. As we have seen, Bhaskar's (equivocal) rejection of correspondence stems from his rejection of Wittgenstein's picture theory, *inter alia*, and the fact that there can be no Archimedean standpoint. Andrew Sayer echoes this:

This scepticism [about truth] arises from a realization that we cannot escape to an Archimedean position from where we can see how discourse and reality, statements and their objects, compare, and from a recognition that the world can only be known under certain particular descriptions . . . Under these circumstances, and bearing in mind that knowledge and the world to which it refers are mostly different kinds of things, what could it mean to say we know the truth about something? And how could we know we had arrived at the truth? Naïve ideas about 'reality checks', about finding some simple formula for discovering the truth and guaranteeing 'realistic theory' must be abandoned. History makes fools of those who claim to have discovered the truth in some absolute, ultimate sense, because even if their claims are not directly falsified, the concepts on which they are framed may be succeeded by different, more powerful ones. (Sayer, 2000, p. 40)

First, it is a *non sequitur* to distil a disabling scepticism from the fact that knowledge and reality are different kinds of things. Equally, issues of epistemology (how can we know) only make sense in virtue of the fact that truth is to be had, so to speak. It seems to me that the main problem is that realists like Sayer mistakenly accept the metaphorical nature of such *X Files*-type catchphrases as 'The Truth is Out There', that is, timeless and *anterior* to human (transitive) inquiry. As we have seen, the notion that truth (or what Bhaskar unhelpfully re-works as alethic truth) is ontological is to commit both idealist and ontic fallacies. As Groff argues, *truth tells us nothing about actual or potential states of affairs* and thus must not be conflated with substantive knowledge-claims. However, it is clear that Sayer has ended up in a cul-de-sac partly because of confusion surrounding absolute truth, which we have already discussed. Indubitably, concepts are succeeded, but precisely because they do not correspond with reality. Here, there is no 'simple formula', as Sayer puts it, for discovering truth. Either our propositions instantiate truth or they do not: how we arrive at truth is distinct and separate from truth itself.

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Layder versus Sayer: Concomitance Theory of Truth versus Practical Adequacy

As we have seen, in Sayer's case the notion of absolute has confused matters. Yet both Bhaskar and Sayer cannot dispense with correspondence. In his widely-acclaimed second edition of *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*, Sayer writes the following:

Perhaps the main problem concerns how something as immaterial as a concept or statement or equation can be said to be 'true of', 'correspond to' or 'represent' something material. If you think about this, the normally hidden metaphorical nature [*sic*] of such terms as 'correspondence' becomes apparent . . . (Sayer, 1992, p. 67)

He then reiterates the impossibility of absolute truth and emphasises (correctly) the fallible nature of knowledge. Interestingly, a few sentences on, he argues that the (realist) admission that all knowledge is fallible does not mean that all knowledge is equally fallible (*contra* irrationalism and relativism). This is a back-door way of admitting that some of our knowledge is true: knowledge cannot be 'more' fallible⁹. In questioning received notions about truth, he notes that the question ought to be a disturbing one 'as the idea of truth has a vital role in society. It is quite understandable that people should be wary of letting go of such a concept, but some accommodation must be made between notions of fallibility and truth' (p. 68). Of course, he does not let go of truth; instead, he attempts unsuccessfully to qualify it or redefine it as 'practical adequacy', which itself presupposes metaphysical truth. There is no need whatsoever to make an accommodation between fallibility and truth, since they presuppose each other.

He suggests that it may help the reader to *replace* or *modify* the concept of truth with that of practical adequacy. Yet which is it to be? If one opts for modification, to what extent and what is being left out? Replacement and modification are miles apart and have quite different ramifications for substantive research! These are not spelled out. However, in concluding his section on truth, he candidly admits that it is not easy 'to find good substitutes for terms like "truth" . . . and "correspondence", but if they are to be continued to be used, we must keep in mind the shortcomings of superficial interpretations which ignore the crucial and radical difference between thought objects and real objects . . .' (p. 71). Ironically, it is precisely the superficial theories of correspondence that warrant critical discussion, not a rejection of correspondence *per se* (which is why Sayer

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cannot avoid it). Indeed, it is in virtue of the fact that our knowledge of reality is conceptually mediated that underscores the untenability of Wittgenstein's picture theory of meaning. What is needed here is rigour, not superficiality, but Sayer's conflation of practical adequacy and truth undercuts the sophisticated critical social realism he has developed (e.g. Sayer, 1995). In his latest book *Realism and Social Science* (Sayer, 2000), he notes that it is common to associate realism with correspondence theories of truth as opposed to conventionalist theories of truth. He reiterates the argument that correspond cannot mean 'mirror' or 'reproduce', for the relation between knowledge and its referents is not like that of mirroring an object or reproducing or representing a copy of it. However, he remains equivocal about retaining correspondence.

If we are to allow a notion of correspondence, it must involve conformability and intelligibility rather than replicability. Realists do not need to suppose that knowledge mirrors the world; rather it interprets it in such a way that expectations and practices it informs are intelligible and reliable. (Sayer, 2000, p. 42)

Pro tem. I want to emphasise that correspondence does not mean reproduce or mirror: transcendentally our beliefs cannot be isomorphic with their referents (the theory of surplus value is not the same as surplus value). Again, we see that Sayer cannot dispense with correspondence and remains too bogged down in criticising reproduction and mirror metaphors. Unquestionably, realists – and ordinary people – do not need to suppose that knowledge mirrors the world, but they *do* need to know that it corresponds (or is congruent) with the way things are!

In reiterating arguments presented in both editions of *Method in Social Science*, Sayer maintains that 'truth might be better understood as 'practical adequacy', that is, in terms of the extent to which it generates expectations about the world and about results of our actions which are realized' (Sayer, 2000, p. 43). Sayer gives the example of two statements, effectively that we can/not walk on water. That we cannot walk on water is more practically adequate since it generates expectations that are realised, namely that we cannot walk on water. In lieu of truth, then, for Sayer it makes sense to judge knowledge as more or less useful rather than true or false. In his *Realist Image in Social Science*, Derek Layder (1990, p. 55) writes that only insofar as Sayer wishes to dispense with notions of truth as exemplified in the positivist and conventionalist views then he would not demur. For Layder, we cannot abolish truth completely, and the conventionalist approach does not do justice to the structures and mechanisms of

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the social world that operate independently of our knowledge of them.

My question here is: which facets of truth are to be abolished (*per impossible*)? If, as Layder rightly argues, there are social mechanisms and structures that operate independently of our knowledge of them, then, transcendently speaking, truth cannot be dispensed with, since our true knowledge is that which corresponds with or affirms the reality of such mechanisms and structures (why we cannot walk on water). However, *vis-à-vis* 'practical adequacy', Layder argues that its most serious drawback is that it completely ignores cognitive claims to validity: 'Cognitive adequacy no longer has a role to play in arbitrating claims to validity; if knowledge is 'useful' or 'practically adequate' then somehow whether it is true or false, correct or incorrect is neither here nor there' (Layder, 1990, p. 56). In contrast, the problem is that 'practical adequacy' cannot avoid correspondence. As Bridges puts it, 'In other words, true beliefs will indeed 'work' (if they have that sort of application) but that they are true or false is determined by something else (*back to correspondence*) rather than by the fact that they work' (1999, p. 605, emphasis added).

Furthermore, Layder points out that when we discuss practical adequacy in a social context (e.g. school improvement strategies underpinned by school effectiveness research), we are enjoined to ask such questions as practically adequate for what and for whom. Equally, different kinds of social theoretical knowledge cannot be judged in terms of their practical adequacy. 'Certainly, the whole edifice of functionalism is practically adequate for functionalists, as is ethnomethodology for ethnomethodologists, and Marxism for Marxists . . . there has to be some invocation of cognitive adequacy and explanatory power, based ultimately on various truth and validity claims . . .' (Layder, 1990, p. 57). For Engholm, Sayer's position results in instrumentalism. He reasons that Sayer finds himself in this rather awkward position because 'he for a moment lapses from a central critical realist position in which the question of what constitutes epistemically significant experience, and what the purpose of science as such is, is of paramount importance' (2000, p. 18). I would argue instead that the lapse is due to confusion about absolutism and an all-too-fast rejection of correspondence.

Layder concludes that realists must adopt an alternative notion of truth – what he calls 'concomitance' – to the conventionalist and the positivist 'correspondence' versions:

The most appropriate strategy . . . would be to adopt some middle ground between correspondence and coherence theories of truth.

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That is, to sustain the notion of reference to external objects of knowledge which is implicit in the notion of correspondence, *without* endorsing the ideas that the relationship . . . is *isomorphic*. (Layder, 1990, p. 58)

He also adds that we must endorse the correct conventionalist notion that the meaning of a concept within theory or conceptual network is to some extent dependent upon its interrelations with other concepts in the network, yet eschew the epistemic fallacy, that is, the notion that objects of knowledge are only constituted within theory or discourse. To reiterate, correspondence does not enjoin isomorphism. However, Layder does not adequately spell out and defend 'concomitance'. He would have been better off simply rejecting correspondence *qua* isomorphism rather than rejecting correspondence *per se*.

5. DEFENDING CORRESPONDENCE

For Bridges (1999), correspondence 'has a certain appeal' and is closest of the five theories he considers to a common-sense understanding of what we mean when we claim the truth of a belief. However, he believes correspondence has some inherent problems. I argue to the contrary here. Bridges was quite right to signal correspondence as being closest to our common sense understanding, since ordinary people could not function without a realist (non-positivist/empiricist) notion of correspondence. Bridges quotes Eisner, who writes that:

To assert that we have a correspondence between our views of reality and reality itself, we would need to know two things. We would need to know reality, as well as our views of it. But if we really knew reality as it really is, we would need to have a view of it. Conversely, since we cannot have knowledge of reality as it is, we cannot know if our views correspond to it. (Eisner, cited in Bridges, 1999, p. 602)

Firstly, it seems to me that the comment 'But if we really knew reality as it really is, we would need to have a view of it', is a bizarre tautology. Secondly, however, the final sentence is simply a restatement of fallibilism, which I have rejected. Bridges argues that a second difficulty derives from an ostensible circularity: 'A proposition is true if it corresponds to a fact – but what is a fact, if not a state of affairs represented by a true proposition. So how informative is the correspondence theory?' (*idem*). A proposition is true if, and only if, it

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corresponds with actual or potential state of affairs. We simply need to accept the final sentence, viz. a fact is a state of affairs represented by a true proposition.

A third problem for Bridges is that states of affairs themselves have to be construed in certain ways. This is dangerously close to committing the epistemic fallacy. We need to know what is meant by 'construed in certain ways'. His example here of 'effective management' does not render problematic correspondence. 'Effective management' involves value judgments and commitments, which would not make sense without correspondence, for we could not condemn new managerialism where 'effective management' is about the imposition of impersonal mechanisms that increase 'standards' (read: examination scores) without our claims about children and how they learn corresponding. The point is that *any* disagreement here only makes sense in the context of correspondence.

A fourth problem concerns how correspondence can be invoked to give an account of truth in mathematics, logic or morality. I am neither a mathematician nor logician. Notwithstanding, crudely speaking, simple addition would be unintelligible without correspondence (either two plus two equals four or it does not). Equally, truth-claims presuppose the logical law of non-contradiction, which is a transcendental prerequisite for communication (and all forms of individual and social practice). The truth or falsity of immoral behaviour derives from our nature *qua* human beings, which of course is contestable. Such contestability is unintelligible without correspondence. Verifying truth-claims about immoral behaviour involves transcendental argumentation about human beings *qua* natural kind and their irreducible powers and liabilities. The salient point here, then, is that correspondence is not context-specific. A fifth, final problem for Bridges is that correspondence 'tends to see truth as a piecemeal characteristic of a fragmentary set of beliefs – with each belief being checked separately for its correspondence with the relevant fact' (p. 603). A realist theory of correspondence does not enjoin this. As we have already seen, we are not in the business of 'stand-alone' propositions (many propositions are part of connected clusters).

So, what does it mean to say the truth corresponds? Above all, it seems to me that much confusion is instantly dispelled if we stick to correspondence *qua* agreement or congruence. The Oxford Dictionary defines it as follows:

Correspond 1 **a** (usu. foll. by *to*) be analogous or similar. **b** (usu. foll. by *to*) agree in amount, position, etc. **c** (usu. foll. by *with, to*)

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be in harmony or agreement. 2. Communicate by interchange of letters.

We must adhere to *c*, viz. to be in harmony or agreement. Immediately, notions of isomorphism, mirroring or resemblance do not figure. Correspondence is thus definitional and is not a criterion of truth. It is also not a resemblance theory. Yet, as Andrew Collier (1994) points out, several philosophers, including Bhaskar, reject correspondence theory on the grounds that only hold good if that theory is taken to involve some notion of the true statement resembling what it is about.

But correspondence does not necessarily involve resemblance. Everyone understands that if the inspector says 'your inventory did not correspond to what was in the warehouse', she is not complaining that a sheet of paper did not resemble a stack of tinned fruit. 'Correspond' here is specially chosen to pick out the relation that holds when *as it is said, so it is*. This may look a bit thin . . . (b)ut it may be filled out . . . by some such account as Bhaskar's, of the deepening of knowledge of the intransitive object as explanatory models are tested . . . (Collier, 1994, p. 240, original emphasis)

As Pring succinctly puts it:

(I)n rejecting a 'picture theory of meaning', in which a statement is said to be true or false depending on whether it 'mirrors' accurately the real world, one still *cannot get rid of the central element of the correspondence theory of truth*. That central element is that the truth or falsity of what is said has something to do with a reality which is independent of the statements made about it. (Pring, 2000, p. 73, emphasis added)

Indeed, on this realist conception it is important to make clear that this is not the same as having settled on criteria of validity. Collier should not be perturbed by his 'thin' definition of correspondence, for truth *qua* formal, regulative norm tells us nothing about actual or potential states of affairs. As Groff reiterates, truth must be distinguished from states of affairs themselves. 'While the norm has an ontic component . . . this formal condition implies neither (1) that truth is a predicate of states of affairs rather than propositions, nor . . . (2) that states of affairs ought to be regarded as truth bearers' (Groff, 2000, p. 428). In other words, such phrases as 'the truth of the matter' or 'the truth shall set you free' must be acknowledged to be metaphors.

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6. TRUTH, REALISM AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

As David Scott (2000) notes, the field of education is riven with disputes, not least about the veracity of different research approaches. Such disputes are almost invariably conducted at the level of method without much regard for matters of ontology and epistemology. Yet, as he argues, it is only at these levels that the real issues are foremost. Scott identifies three broad positions in relation to these debates: naïve realism, radical relativism and transcendental realism. However, the point I wish to make here is that such debates are quintessentially about the pursuit of truth. Furthermore, this pursuit cannot avoid the nature of social reality itself. For Bridges:

Correspondence theory – or something like it – is intimately associated with classical scientific or empiricist research, in which typically the researcher is combining the collection of data from a (perceived) external world and recording it in a way which faithfully reflects the data. (1999, p. 609)

Here, I want to reiterate that we must distinguish between ontology, method and correspondence: whatever the nature and extent of intimacy between correspondence and empiricism, for example, they are not the same and must not be conflated. For critiques of empiricism are possible by virtue of the fact that its secreted ontology does not correspond with reality (see Scott, 2000; Archer, 2002).

I want to end this paper by way of underscoring the fact that educational research is about the pursuit of truth and, at the same time, such pursuit involves ontological commitments that may or may not correspond with educational realities. That is, in educational research (as in any field of study) the nature of what exists cannot be unrelated to how it is studied, what is held to exist (ontology) shapes considerations about how it should be explained. As Archer (1998) argues, social ontology plays a regulative role vis-à-vis the explanatory methodology for the reason that it conceptualises social reality in certain terms. Conversely, regulation is mutual, since what is held to exist cannot remain immune from what does exist: 'Such consistency is a general requirement and it usually requires continuous two-way adjustment between ontology and methodology to achieve and sustain it as such' (Archer, 1998, p. 17). For example, I have argued that the nature of social reality had led to a re-examination of previous assumptions on the part of some influential school effectiveness

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researchers, in particular the (belated) incorporation of structural inequality and an acknowledgement of socio-political systems (Archer, 1999b, 2002).

Archer argues that the constituent elements of social theorising are threefold, that none is dispensable and that each exerts a regulatory role on the other as follows: Social Ontology (SO) → Explanatory Methodology (EM) → Practical Social Theory (PST). As I have said, the relationship between SO and EM consists in maintaining that what is held to exist must condition how it is to be explained. However, it is not the case that the relationship between the two is one of logical implication, since 'it must remain possible to hold that some things exist socially which carry no particular implications about how we should study them or what importance should be assigned to them in explanations' (Archer, 1998, p. 72). Practical social theorists do not directly derive their propositions from SO or its congruent EMs, since many of the latter can be compatible with the former.

The nature of different social ontologies and their associated methods of explanation are manifested stronger at a particular level of PST or with specific time spans. Thus, for example, Individualists, insisting that the ultimate constituents of the social world were individual people . . . next adduced related explanatory injunctions (methodological individualism) which worked more convincingly . . . at the level of interpersonal relations, confined to those taking place between contemporary individuals. (Archer, 1998, p. 73)

The reason for stressing the tripartite connections stems from the fact that we cannot simply gather substantive findings, which derive from different ontological assumptions as transmitted through their cognate explanatory methodologies.

For example, in proffering the theoretical resources with which school effectiveness researchers might profitably enhance their work, Lauder *et al.* rightly pose the question of the relative autonomy of schools and the ways in which they may or may not be able to mediate external influences:

The general point here is not that a position should be taken on the question of relative autonomy but rather to document the various circumstances in which schools may or may not be able to mediate external forces. In this sense the basic postulate should not be the closed assumption that schools are relatively

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autonomous but rather the question of the conditions under which they might be relatively autonomous. (Lauder *et al.* 1998, p. 64)

Lauder *et al.* are providing a PST, since PST is propositional: in this instance they enjoin that we provide a specification of the conditions under which agency is conditioned to pursue change or engage in replication. In other words, we are talking about specifying the degrees of freedom versus stringency of constraints (Archer, 1995; Archer, 1999a, 2002). We now need to take two steps back: the EM that underpins the latter specification is *analytical dualism*, of which the SO is a stratified one (see Archer, 1995; Scott, 2000; Archer, 1999a, 2001, 2002). Analytical dualism is only possible because structure and agency stand in temporal relations of priority and posteriority. As Archer argues, it is 'because structure and agency are phased over different tracts of time [that we are able] to formulate practical social theories [PST] in terms of the former being prior to the latter, having autonomy from it and exerting a causal influence upon it' (Archer, 1996, p. 694).

We have already seen that there is a growing pragmatist trend in educational research (see note 3) whereby practical educational research is carried out without reference to ontological and epistemological concerns. For Reynolds, 'rapid progress was made' and, for Teddlie, the orientation of many in the USA is to 'act rather than reflect'. Teddlie also adds that 'In reality many practitioners are currently interested in what could work at their school . . . [rather] . . . than in ruminations about social inequalities associated with different socio-economic classes. "Redistribution" of resources is the last thing on their minds' (cited in Thrupp, 2001, p. 447). This commentary readily lends itself to New Right incorporation, since social inequalities, their nature, their impact and their durability are set aside in the quest for 'what works' in schools. Of course, the minute Reynolds introduces the notion of 'rapid progress', he immediately embroils himself in values. The amorality of pragmatic utility whilst evident to most continues to fall on deaf ears in some influential SE quarters. Cramming 11-year-olds may work in terms of improving SATs (Standard Assessment Tasks), but those concerned with *understanding* would maintain otherwise. In essence, *pragmatic utility uncouples itself from SO and EM*. However, all research presupposes (or secretes) an ontology. That cramming may work secretes propositions, wittingly or otherwise, about the nature of children *qua* learners. Furthermore, the work of Reynolds and Teddlie also secretes an implicit voluntarism that can only be entertained on the basis of

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a denial of *sui generis* emergent structural and cultural properties, that is, a 'depthless' SO (see Archer, 2002).

7. CONCLUSION

This paper has reclaimed metaphysical truth for educational research and defended the correspondence theory of truth, of which the generic equivocal rejection is largely attributable to some of the ways in which it has been erroneously theorised. Fundamentally, correspondence may formally be described in the following terms: a statement (proposition, belief) is true if and only if what the statement says to be the case actually is the case. The pursuit of truth (which is instantiated by propositions) is a transcendental condition of educational inquiry and research. It tells us nothing about actual or potential states of affairs and must therefore not be conflated with substantive knowledge claims. To recapitulate, what is clear from the foregoing is that realist philosophers and social theorists cannot avoid correspondence in some form. That form is quite simple and resonates with the ordinary definition. Realist philosophers like Bhaskar and social theorists like Sayer have been too preoccupied with inadequate (especially positivist) conceptions of correspondence, which in turn has led them down intractable culs-de-sac. Instead, I have argued that we eschew the misleading conceptions of correspondence and, at the same time, remember that truth is metaphysical.

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9. NOTES

- ¹ Bailey's paper is concerned with the transcendental need for truth *qua* regulatory norm vis-à-vis educational research. This paper extends this transcendental prerequisite in its defence of correspondence (ironically against leading academics in the realist camp itself).
- ² Transcendental realism makes claims as to what reality must be like in order to enable (social) scientific analysis of which *a priori* propositions can be advanced. Bhaskar's (1978) appropriation of Kant's term 'transcendental' is not done without qualification. The difference consists in the fact that while Kant's arguments lead to a theory about the structure-imposing power of the mind vis-à-vis the

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world, Bhaskar's lead to extra-discursive conclusions, namely about what the world must be like. This is where Bhaskar parts company with Kant, since we are not dealing with unknowable things-in-themselves (noumena). See Scott (2000) and Archer (2002, chapter 1) for discussion of transcendental realism in educational research.

³ In fact, at present the field of educational research internationally is witnessing a pragmatist trend, whereby practical research is carried out without reference to ontological and epistemological concerns. For David Reynolds, a leading UK school effectiveness academic, 'Precisely because we did not waste time on philosophical discussion or on values debates, we made rapid progress' (1998, p. 20). Equally, for Teddlie, 'The orientation of many in the US is to do rather than to reflect . . .' (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000, p. 27).

⁴ Thus, to Martyn Hammersley:

. . . there is no escape from philosophical assumptions for researchers. Whether we like it or not, we cannot avoid such assumptions. And, sometimes, the assumptions that we make lead us into error. I believe that this is the case with some of the key epistemological ideas current among ethnographers . . . At the centre of these problems is the doctrine of realism, by which I mean the idea that there is a reality independent of the researcher whose nature can be known, and that the aim of research is to produce accounts that correspond to that reality . . . It is a position on which much ethnography is founded (1992, p. 43).

This is a clear summary of the realist position. Ontology and epistemology are kept separate, thereby avoiding the epistemic and ontic fallacies respectively. That is, realist research does not endorse the view that statements about being can be reduced to, or analysed in terms of, statements about knowledge or the reduction of knowledge to its object. Furthermore, that our assumptions may lead us into error underscores the fallibility of knowledge-claims. Finally, any account either corresponds or does not correspond with the ways things are (or have been): they are true or false.

⁵ For a useful discussion of non-realist theories see Kirkham (1992, pp. 73–118) and Bridges (1999, pp. 603–608). I do not discuss such theories here, since they all have in common the view that extra-mental reality or the '(extra-mental) facts' have nothing to do with truth or falsity.

⁶ Last semester, a significant proportion of first-year undergraduates asserted that matters of truth and falsity are not important. And for one senior colleague, contradictory theories are simply 'different'; they are not right or wrong (or true or false). This begs the question of the rationale of theorising.

⁷ As Norris (1994, p. 162) argues, relativist arguments 'ignore the extent to which past theories are often not so much discredited *en bloc* as conserved and refined through the ongoing process of scientific elaboration and critique'.

⁸ Whilst I do not wish to detract overly from the key purpose of this paper, it is important to anticipate that some would want to query the idea that educational institutions and practices are intransitive, i.e. that the social world is independent of our knowledge of it. Very briefly, Sayer argues that although social practices are concept-dependent, it does not mean that they are identical with the concepts on which they depend. Whilst I would prefer concept-linked (see Archer, 2002), the salient point is that while the concepts used by actors (implicitly or explicitly) are necessary for an explanation of their practices, they are not sufficient, 'for they are not only likely to be flawed but to mask or misrepresent certain aspects . . .' (Sayer, 2000, p. 34). Moreover, socially produced or constructed phenomena such as institutions are independent of the 'constructions' (in the

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sense of interpretations or descriptions) that researchers have of them. How else can we account for the Marxist corpus and the objective reality of the capital/labour relation?

⁹ Even metaphorically, this would still confuse matters, since such grounds presuppose the validity of truth-claims.

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