

## Book Symposium

## Open Access

Ruth Groff

# Tuukka Kaidesoja on Critical Realist Transcendental Realism

DOI 10.1515/jso-2014-0050

**Abstract:** I argue that critical realists think pretty much what Tukka Kaidesoja says that he himself thinks, but also that Kaidesoja's objections to the views that he attributes to critical realists are not persuasive.

**Keywords:** Critical realism; Naturalism; Roy Bhaskar; Social ontology.

Thank you to the organizers of this symposium for inviting me to participate in it, and to Tuukka Kaidesoja for generously joining in.

Here are the general facts of the matter, with respect to Kaidesoja's *Naturalizing Critical Realist Social Ontology*. Kaidesoja thinks that:

- (1) Naturalism (the view that philosophical questions are properly settled via the deliverances and/or methodology of science) is preferable to competing meta-theoretical views;
- (2) Roy Bhaskar's so-called "transcendental" argument against Hume's account of causation fails;
- (3) Rom Harré and E. H. Madden's (1975) treatment of what a causal power is (in *Causal Powers*) is preferable to the view of powers that Bhaskar (1978[1975]) advances in *A Realist Theory of Science (RTS)*; Harré and Madden's view is better because: (a) Bhaskar (according to Kaidesoja) is a Platonist about properties, while Harré and Madden are Aristotelians or immanent realists; and (b) Platonism about properties (Kaidesoja says) is at odds with naturalism;
- (4) Mario Bunge's social ontology is preferable to Roy Bhaskar's (1998[1979]) in *The Possibility of Naturalism (PON)*, and to that of other critical realists; Bunge's view is better because: (a) Bhaskar and other critical realists (says Kaidesoja) think that social structures are an abstraction, while Bunge

---

**Ruth Groff**, Department of Political Science, McGannon Hall, Saint Louis University, St. Louis, MO, 63108, USA, e-mail: rgroff@slu.edu

 ©2015, Ruth Groff, published by De Gruyter.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 License.

- believes them to be concrete things; and (b) what amounts to Platonism about social structures, and/or society as a whole, is at odds with naturalism;
- (5) William Wimsatt's view of emergence is better than Bhaskar's because Bhaskar (says Kaidesoja) thinks three different things about emergence, none of which is sound;
  - (6) A good way to defend his (Kaidesoja's) own metaphysical commitments is to reference scientific theory that would seem to confirm them (in addition to maintaining that they are consistent with the principle of naturalism itself, while competing positions are not).

It is a virtue of Kaidesoja's book that it is as detailed and as philosophical as it is. Nevertheless, I am not persuaded either that "non-naturalized" critical realism has the problems that Kaidesoja says it does, or that philosophy is or should be naturalized. Perhaps more than anything, I do not recognize the view that he ascribes to critical realists, according to which properties and social structures exist in a transcendent, never-instantiated realm of being, and emergent wholes are defined, *a la* Aquinas, as necessarily having no parts. To my mind, critical realists think pretty much what Kaidesoja says *he* thinks – allowing for disagreement amongst friends along the way. Thus from my perspective there is something a bit surreal about the way in which he has positioned himself. Given the complexity and reflexivity of the issues at hand, I will proceed by simply addressing, in turn, each of the six claims above. To avoid any misunderstanding, I should note that Kaidesoja often stipulates that Bhaskar says several things on a given topic, and that he (Kaidesoja) objects only to one or some part(s) thereof. I am concerned only with the objections, since they are the substance of Kaidesoja's critique.

(1) ***Philosophy should be naturalized.*** That naturalism is the right norm for philosophy is central to Kaidesoja's argument – though, for better or for worse, in rejecting the views that he attributes to Bhaskar, Kaidesoja primarily appeals to the *principle* of appealing to science, rather than to science itself, in this case social science. Aristotelianism about properties is better than Platonism because the former, according to Kaidesoja, is consistent with the recommended principle, while the latter is not. The same is said of Bunge's CESM model of a system as compared to Bhaskar's TMSA model of society.

I want to say three quick things about this first point. First, it is only asserted. Kaidesoja never actually makes a case for why we should undertake to naturalize philosophy. Second, naturalism is not a substantive ontology. As a philosophical stance, it is a second-order prescriptive view to the effect (a) that the answers to properly formulated philosophical questions can be derived from (or are given by) first-order scientific theory; and/or (b) that philosophy ought to be

methodologically akin to scientific inquiry. In relation to social science, it is a version of (b), viz., a meta-theoretical claim to the effect that social science need not be different in methodological or explanatory kind than natural science. Third, Bhaskar rejects Humean regularity theory on the grounds that it is rationally incompatible with the practice of experimentation (construed in non-instrumentalist terms). One might well think such a criterion to be in keeping with naturalism.

(2) ***Bhaskar's transcendental argument against Hume.*** The core argument of RTS was as follows. First: (i) it is (“as every schoolboy [and schoolgirl] knows”) possible to knock over a test tube and thereby muck up an experiment; (ii) no one thinks that in thwarting the occurrence of a regular sequence, one has suspended the laws of nature; therefore (iii) the laws of nature may not be identified with regular sequences. Second: (i) experiments involve an artificial closure of the environment, so as to produce epistemically significant regular sequences; (ii) it is assumed, by those who regard experimentation to be a truth-conducive practice, that the causal relations that are thought to be thereby discovered (or confirmed) hold outside of the laboratory, where the artificially induced regularities do not obtain; therefore, (iii) if experimentation is what its defenders take it to be, it must be that manifest regularities are grounded in something that exists “transfactually”, i.e., even when the artificially induced regularity does not obtain. Bhaskar, as Kaidesoja correctly reports, then goes on to argue that what grounds manifest regularities (observed or not) are causal powers.

Bhaskar drew the following comparison between his RTS argument and Kant's transcendental argument in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant 1997). First, Kant began with the fact of experience as such; Bhaskar begins with a specific type of experience, namely experimentation as construed by those who take such activity to be (a) rational; and (b) a means of isolating and identifying real features of the world (i.e., not the conception of experimentation adopted by instrumentalists). Second, Kant claimed that for empirical experience to be possible, various synthetic *a priori* operations of pure reason must have already occurred, such that there is a unified phenomenal object (located in space and time, subject – as Kant had it – to causal law, etc.) to be experienced; Bhaskar claims that for experimentation to be both rational and what non-instrumentalists think it is, it cannot be the case that causal relations consist in regularity, and it must be that experimentally induced regularities are grounded in something that holds transfactually.

Space does not permit me to address the details of Kaidesoja's critique of Bhaskar's approach. But Kaidesoja sums up his objections as follows: “[E]ven if this kind of ‘naturalized transcendental argument’ could be presented

sufficiently clearly, this kind of halfway position between naturalism and Kantianism is untenable” (p. 93). The Kantian will be unhappy that Bhaskar takes his conclusion to be provisional (i.e., because it rests upon the veracity of the view of experimentation stated above). The naturalist, meanwhile, will insist (a) that insofar as Bhaskar engages in *a priori* or conceptual analysis, the approach is inferior to that of naturalism because the development of empirical science has “cast serious doubts to most conclusions of *a priori* arguments concerning the nature of reality” (p. 95); and (b) if Bhaskar’s argument is taken to imply something about what the world is in *fact* like (and not just something about what it must be like assuming a given conception of experimentation), then will have to be that the analysis bottoms out in *a posteriori* reasoning – and if it does, then Bhaskar is not entitled to refer to his approach as being a transcendental deduction.

I think that the answers to these objections are fairly simple. To Kaidesoja’s Kantian, the reply is: “While there is, indeed, a place in philosophy for conceptual or *a priori* analysis, the deliverances of philosophy are nevertheless defeasible.” Luckily, Kaidesoja agrees that they are so. (One might also add “Yes, of course: the ‘transcendental realism’ that Bhaskar affirms is precisely not the ‘transcendental realism’ that Kant rejects. That is the whole point, both substantively and rhetorically.”) To Kaidesoja’s naturalist one should say re: (a) “In point of fact Bhaskar does *not* rely upon *a priori* reasoning to establish that the practice of experimentation that he *does* subject to such analysis is both sound and widely-held”; and (b) “If, in your estimation, the argument is not really a transcendental one, feel free to choose a different label for it; nothing hangs on the terminology.”

(3) **Transcendental properties.** Kaidesoja can be expected to reply that although the argument about method comes before the chapter on powers, “transcendental” is certainly more than an undeserved descriptor when it comes to Bhaskar’s treatment of properties (here, powers; i.e., properties of being able to *phi*). Kaidesoja contrasts Bhaskar’s concept of a causal power with that of Harré and Madden. Bhaskar, Kaidesoja says, believes that properties are located entirely outside of every-day empirical reality, whereas Harré and Madden believe in properties that inhere in their bearers. Harré and Madden believe in fully concrete powerful particulars, while Bhaskar believes in concrete particulars the properties of which are fundamentally otherworldly.

It is worth reminding ourselves of the lay of the land, conceptually. With respect to views about properties (here conceived as universals), there are those who believe that such things exist, and there are those who do not. Amongst the former, i.e., realists, there is a divide between those (viz., Platonists) who think (a) that universals exist independently of their instantiations, such that, in principle, there could be a universal of which there has never been an instance; and

(b) those (viz., Aristotelians, or immanent realists) who think that universals exist, but only in their instances. Nominalists fall into different camps too, but all agree that universals do not exist.

Now, I agree with Kaidesoja that, unlike Bhaskar, Harré and Madden are (or were) disinclined to talk about powers as such, preferring to speak of concrete powerful particulars. But it is not obvious that the correct way to parse this is to say that Harré and Madden are (or were) immanent realists about properties while Bhaskar is (or was, or sometimes is) a Platonist. True, Bhaskar is at pains to insist that a power is precisely the sort of thing that exists even when it is not being exercised or expressed, i.e., even when it is latent. A power also exists even when it has been expressed but the regular sequence that it underwrites has been counteracted by the display of some other power. This curious fact about powers Bhaskar represents in *RTS* via the metaphor of domains – the Real, the Actual and the Empirical – in particular via the distinction between the domains of the Real and the Actual. The question, then, is this: Should we think that a latent and/or counteracted power – a power that is not actualized as a manifest regularity – is, in virtue of being latent and/or counteracted, not instantiated?

I think that the answer is no. The powers of the Real are instantiated in their bearers, not in the domain of the Actual (i.e., in their display or in the effects that their bearers may or may not cause). Kaidesoja may counter that Bhaskar means to include in the domain of the Real properties that have never been instantiated in or exemplified by *any* bearer, not just instantiated powers that may be latent or counteracted. It is possible, but I see no decisive evidence for it. Bhaskar does countenance, even as early as *RTS*, the existence entities that just *are* the power to do this or that – and perhaps even an ultimate underlying field of potentiality. But this alone does not settle the question of whether Bhaskar is a Platonist or an Aristotelian about universals. Finally, it is not at all clear that being a Platonist about properties is at odds with naturalism any more than is being an Aristotelian (in the specified respect only) about properties. Inasmuch as they are equally consistent with things being ways that scientists can explain, the dispute would seem to be one that either (a) tells against naturalism (because it can only be decided philosophically) or (b) must be regarded (by the naturalist) as being meaningless (because it can only be decided philosophically). One would be just as likely, it seems to me, to think that naturalism demands empiricism, which in turn (one might think) demands nominalism, than to think that naturalism requires that one believe in universals but be an immanent realist about them.

(4) **Social structures.** Kaidesoja says that Bhaskar and other critical realists think that the social structures that constitute society are “locate[d]... in the transcendental realm of being that is ontologically separate from concrete human

beings and their social interactions” (p. 183). As evidence, Kaidesoja points to the claim that they consist in (or, as Bhaskar has it in *PON*, that the point of contact between structure and agency is *mediated by*) positions and/or sociological roles, the causal properties of which do not reduce to those of the individuals who occupy them. Such a view is antithetical to naturalism, Kaidesoja says. The better account, he thinks, is a modified version of Mario Bunge’s approach, wherein social systems are thought to include “social relations (e.g., employer-employee, manager-managed, friendship and communication relations) between [its] members” (p. 199), in addition to other relations and elements.

Others will no doubt have a lot to say on this point, so I will be brief. First, here is what the Bhaskar of *PON* says society *qua* a totality of social structures is: “Society, then, is an articulated ensemble of tendencies and powers which, unlike natural ones, exist only as long as they (or at least some of them) are being exercised; are exercised in the last instance via the intentional activity of human beings; and are not necessarily space-time invariant (Bhaskar 1998 [1979]: p. 39).” Bhaskar’s view has been criticized by some on the grounds that it amounts to reducing society to individuals. The charge of atomism may or may not be well-founded, but it is not implausible. By contrast, it is very hard to see how Bhaskar’s approach fits with Kaidesoja’s description of it. Second, it is also hard to see a difference that makes a difference in kind (if at all) between the concept of social structure that Kaidesoja endorses and the critical realist conception that he rejects; it is an in-house disagreement, at most. If we are to conclude that critical realists believe social structures (or society as a whole) to be a transcendent, purely abstract phenomenon, then I suspect that we will have to conclude the same of Bunge. Third, no critical realist that I know of *does* believe that. The proponent of causal powers who comes closest to holding such a view is Rom Harré, who is an avowed nominalist with respect to sociological phenomena.

Kaidesoja may say that the difference that makes a difference is that Bunge believes in relationships between persons (and perhaps between collective subjects), but not in relationships between positions and/or roles. It is positions and/or roles that, being abstractions, turn social structures (and by extension society, insofar as it is thought to be made up of them) into an abstraction for critical realists. The problem with this argument, for someone such as Kaidesoja who believes in emergent sociological phenomena himself, is that just as Bunge’s “social relations” are not un-tethered abstractions in virtue of being relational entities, neither are positions or roles. Positions and roles are mid-level emergent phenomena, if they exist. But they are no less concretely instantiated than are “social systems”, either for being less comprehensive than is a social system, or for being *occupied or enacted* by persons rather than being *composed* of persons.

(5) **Emergence.** Kaidesoja criticizes Bhaskar's account of emergence for the following reasons. First, Bhaskar (he says) is not entitled to think of emergent powers in compositional terms (i.e., as properties of a whole that are grounded in the arrangement of its parts) – this because Bhaskar, Kaidesoja believes, does not conceive of societies as *having* parts. Kaidesoja offers two quotations in support of this reading, one from *RTS*, the other from *PON*. The former appears, in the original, in the context of a passing rejection of “the corpuscularian/mechanical programme” (p. 85) (“in which it was natural to assume that all ‘things’ properly so-called were just more or less highly differentiated aggregates of matter, and so could be viewed either as wholes or parts [or as both]”) in favor of an ontology that includes forces, and even sheer potentiality. As it happens, I cannot find the cited *PON* passage, though the page reference places it in the context of Bhaskar's effort there to differentiate the study of society as a relational phenomenon from the study of groups as mere pluralities. Given the citations, the question is an interpretive one. Does it make sense to think, on the basis of these phrases, that the Bhaskar of early critical realism really did mean, by disavowing (a) what Brian Ellis has called the dead world of mechanism; and (b) the idea that societies are pluralities, to deny that societies have parts (to which they do not reduce)? To my mind, the balance of textual evidence suggests that the answer is no; it does not make sense to think that. However, even if Bhaskar did mean to say that emergent wholes have no parts, he would be in fine Thomistic and contemporary neo-Aristotelian company in holding such a view. Kaidesoja's second objection is that Bhaskar, being a Platonist about properties, conceives of *emergent* powers, too, as Platonic universals, just as all non-emergent properties are. I have addressed the issue of Platonism about properties above, though I will add that Bhaskar's stipulation that the powers of society as a totality of structures exist only if at least some of them are being expressed via the action of persons – this stipulation should obviate the claim that Bhaskar thinks of sociological properties as being disconnected from concrete actors. Third, as Kaidesoja would have it, Bhaskar holds that in addition to emergent entities and (their) emergent powers, there are such things as “levels”, which are also, and independently, emergent. This seems to me to be a patently over-literal reading of the locution of levels.

(6) **Kaidesoja's argumentative strategy.** Several things are striking at this level of analysis. First, as I have already noted, the principle that philosophical debate ought to be naturalized is simply asserted. Second, what Kaidesoja actually *does* in the book is first commit himself philosophically – to the reality of powers; to immanent realism about universals; to the reality of emergent entities, with emergent properties, rather than to ontological reduction – and only then, after the fact, gesture towards empirical work that either exemplifies or allows for such

commitments. Finally, and perhaps most telling, the metaphysics to which he is committed is entirely at odds with mainstream social science.

I worry that I have been hard on Tuukka Kaidesoja. But if what I have said is correct, then the bottom line is that there is no appreciable difference between naturalized critical realism and regular critical realism. Kaidesoja's version of the latter is a straw man (or woman, in my case), signaling only, if anything, an underlying ambivalence about Bhaskar's unabashed repudiation of empiricism. Since the metaphysics upon which all more or less agree is hardly orthodox, either in social science or, even now, in philosophy, this agreement seems both a good thing and the most important thing.

## Bibliography

Bhaskar, Roy (1978[1975]): *A Realist Theory of Science*. 2nd edition. Sussex: The Harvester Press.

Bhaskar, Roy (1998[1979]): *The Possibility of Naturalism: A Philosophical Critique of the Contemporary Human Sciences*. 2nd edition. Brighton: The Harvester Press.

Harré, Rom and Edward H. Madden (1975): *Causal Powers: A Theory of Natural Necessity*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Kant, Immanuel (1997): *Critique of Pure Reason*. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. (Trans. and Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.