



Mervyn Hartwig: Roy Bhaskar and the philosophy of critical realism

By Solange Maria de Barros



I invited Mervyn who kindly answered some questions about Roy and the philosophy of critical realism. I am very grateful for this opportunity to have this interview. He is founding editor of *Journal of Critical Realism* and editor and principal author of *Dictionary of Critical Realism*. He recently completed a series of introductions to new Routledge editions of all Roy Bhaskar's solo-authored books. He taught history and philosophy of the social sciences for many years at the University of Sydney and Macquarie University. He is now retired and lives in London. Email: mhartwig@betinternet.com

Solange – Tell us about Roy's personal life and professional career.

Mervyn – Your questions seem to assume that the philosophy of Roy Bhaskar and critical realism (CR) amount to pretty much the same thing. It's important to understand that critical realism has always been a collective project, involving distinguished social theorists and scientists as well as philosophers. Roy was always careful to say that he was the chief architect, not of CR, but of the philosophy of CR, and there is of course an important difference. That said, his philosophy is undoubtedly really important because it provides a justification and orienting metatheory for the CR research programme at the highest level, so in the spirit of your questions I'll confine my remarks largely to Roy's contribution. Ram Roy Bhaskar was born in 1944 and grew up in the middle class suburb of Teddington in London. His father was an Indian who trained as a GP (medical practitioner) before migrating to England in the late 1930s and setting up a thriving practice in London. His mother was an English nurse who administered the practice with great success. Roy (who dropped 'Ram' from his name when he was the victim of racist bullying at school) undertook his primary and secondary education at posh London public schools. His younger brother Krishan told me that as a child he (Krishan) gave up trying to compete with his brilliant brother because Roy could do things like tell you in a flash what day of the week July 25th 2021 will be. Roy made several trips to India with his family during his



childhood, and developed an interest in 'Third World' poverty and 'underdevelopment', coming to see himself as an 'insider outsider' in England and as a proponent of universal human flourishing. His father was determined that Roy should become a doctor, but Roy escaped this fate by winning a scholarship to Oxford, where he read PPE (philosophy, politics, economics) and got a first. At postgraduate level he began work on a thesis in economics, hoping to get to the bottom of global underdevelopment and poverty, but he soon discovered that mainstream economics doesn't allow comparison between theory and the real world. So he switched to a philosophy thesis to seek out the deep intellectual underpinnings of this irrealist approach that was blocking the path to emancipation.

Solange – Can you comment briefly on how the philosophy of critical realism was developed?

Mervyn – Roy soon discovered that there was a taboo on talking about the real world in philosophy too. This had its roots in the injunctions of Hume and Kant not to do ontology or the philosophical study of being; it was sufficient 'to treat only of the network, and not what the network describes', as the young Wittgenstein put it. So, a generation before the recent 'returns to ontology', Roy conceived a highly ambitious project to revindicate ontology: to show that ontology was both possible and necessary and to elaborate a new ontology. This took three forms: a realist theory of science, a realist theory of social science and the theory and practice of explanatory critique. The project put Roy very much at odds with then-fashionable linguistic philosophy and postmodernism. It was already outlined in detail in a 130,000-word thesis he submitted in 1970 for a DPhil, which his Wittgensteinian examiners declined to read because it was 'too long'. A second thesis in 1974 was rejected on the grounds that it did not make an original contribution to knowledge. A year later it was published virtually unchanged as *A Realist Theory of Science*, which is now a classic. Roy held several positions at Oxford (to come back to your question about his career) before moving to the University of Edinburgh as a lecturer in philosophy (1973-82). He then withdrew from full-time academic work in order to concentrate on his writing and promote his philosophy, although he continued to take up temporary teaching positions in Oxford, elsewhere in the UK and increasingly in Scandinavia. From 2007 he was a part-time professorial world scholar at the Institute of Education, University of London.

Roy's project was carried through in his first three books (*A Realist Theory of Science*, *The Passivity of Naturalism* and *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*, first published in 1975, 1979 and 1986, respectively). In each case, in a brilliant adaptation of Kant's philosophical method, (conditional and relative) transcendental argumentation for realist positions went hand in hand with immanent (and, in the third book, explanatory) critique of irrealist positions that were standing in the way of human freedom. Kant's own so-called Copernican revolution was shown to be in fact an anti-Copernican counter-revolution that anthropocentrically relocated humans at the centre of the known universe. The great irrealist aporia or theory-practice contradiction that Roy latched onto in developing a



realist philosophy of science was the fact that denial of ontology went hand in hand with the generation of an implicit empiricist ontology. Its counterpart in the philosophy of social science was the dualism endemic to that domain: the dichotomies of structure and agency, individualism and holism, body and mind, causes and reasons, facts and values that were nested within an overarching dualism of positivistically understood nature and hermeneutically construed society and were resolved by CR's new non-positivist naturalism. The project established that only ontological realism (synchronic emergent powers materialism) was consistent with the actuality of epistemological relativism (transcendental or scientific realism) and the possibility of judgemental rationalism (practical materialism, grounded in the transformational model of social activity). The metatheory it articulated came to be known first as critical realism and then as basic or original critical realism (BCR). It provides the fundamental orienting framework for the thriving CR social theory and social science that we see today. It was further deepened and developed by Roy in *Dialectic* (1993) and *Plato Etc.* (1994), which elaborated an adequate account of absence, absencing and change; an alethic or ontological theory of truth; an ethics grounded in the 'pulse of freedom' or the human conatus to eudaimonia or 'the free flourishing of each as a condition for the free flourishing of all'; and a fundamental critique of the whole irrealist tradition of Western philosophy and its support for the status quo of master-slave-type societies.

Solange – Tell us something about Roy's spiritual turn.

Mervyn – It should be noted that Roy was by no means alone among philosophers and intellectuals in making a spiritual turn towards the end of the millennium; there were widespread 'returns' to religion and spirituality at this time. One of the main bases of this phenomenon was undoubtedly (growing awareness of) the escalating planetary metacrisis (or 'crisis system', as Roy called it) that the human species is now facing – and promoting. For the first time in history the basis of life itself on planet Earth is being put at risk by human impact, and there is need for unity and solidarity – the paradigmatic domain of spirituality – as never before. My own view is that, because the deep dynamical drive of the capitalist system to greed and growth is the main social cause of this metacrisis, the fundamental structure of capitalism will have to be transformed; Roy was more guarded, holding that it can perhaps be radically reformed. However that may be, a concern to increase the cultural resources of emancipatory movements was undoubtedly one of Roy's main motivations in undertaking his spiritual turn. At a more personal level, while having Reiki in Cyprus late in 1994 Roy had spiritual experience or 'aha!' moment that he took to be revelatory of the deep interior of things, and took a decision to systematically investigate this domain. There was already a certain developmental logic intrinsic to his philosophical system that was taking it in the direction of spirituality. Roy later took to referring to his spiritual turn as 'so called', because, I think, he considered that it had been spiritual all along in its drive to overcome dualism, alienation and split; and certainly a



strong argument can be made that metaRealism is implicit in the earlier work. That work arguably does successfully resolve all the main dualisms of Western philosophy and social theory, but with the exception of the most momentous one of all – the antinomy of slavery and freedom famously noted by Rousseau: people as such are free, but everywhere in chains. If realism is true, how is it that irrealism is everywhere dominant? Irrealism is dominant, Roy reasons, because it reflects the oppressive structures of the master–slave-type social reality we inhabit, so realism can be conceived to be true only if it reflects a deeper, more basic level that most of us haven't fully developed or that is so occluded by heteronomous structures that we don't notice it and resign ourselves to living in a half-world or demi-reality. Not only is this more basic level accessible to people everywhere, Roy argues, it is already pervasive, if largely unnoticed, in our daily lives, informing and sustaining everything we do, the indispensable substratum of social life. It is present in what you are doing now. Indeed, it suffuses the whole of being, without saturating it, for the universe is now conceived of as a holistic totality in which everything is enfolded or co-present within everything else at the level of fundamental possibility. It is the 'arrival' of this concept of generalized co-presence that enables the sublation of idealism and materialism, supernaturalism and naturalism in metaRealism and provides the basis for a truly secular spirituality that can appeal to people of 'all faiths and no faith'. As I see it, metaRealism rethinks the meaning of materialism and the natural world for our times in keeping with Roy's account of emergence and with modern science. The cosmos is an open, exponentially expanding and developing implicitly conscious (or, if preferred, informational) physical system. This new outlook is brilliantly caught in a sentence towards the end of *The Philosophy of MetaReality* that may serve as Roy's epitaph:

It is not that there are the starry heavens above and the moral law within, as Kant would have it; rather, the true basis of your virtuous existence is the fact that the starry heavens are within you, and you are within them.

It is important to note that metaRealism is not in competition with religion and theology; it proceeds at a higher level of abstraction and wants to underlabour for religion and help it thrive in a manner that promotes universal human flourishing. It does not take a view as to what lies beyond the cosmos as we know it, except to argue that forms of absence must be ontologically prior there.

Solange – What were the consequences within critical realism and for Roy of the spiritual turn? Do you agree that it was strongly resisted by some critical realists?

Mervyn – The spiritual turn was certainly received with considerable hostility by many critical realists, including myself initially. There have always been prominent critical realists who are deeply religious and/or spiritual, besides many who are atheists or agnostics, so there was nothing new about a senior critical realist being spiritual. However, until



Roy's turn religious and spiritual critical realists were in the closet about their beliefs. They would not, and felt they could not, discuss these beliefs in public or in their work, and so were damagingly split between (private) practice and (public) theory – in CR terms they were unserious about their religious beliefs. The default position in the academy outside theology departments and the like was atheism. In sociology and social theory in particular there was and still is a deeply entrenched taboo on discussing the truth claims of religion and spirituality that goes by the name of 'methodological atheism', which often translates into active hostility to religion and spirituality. As a result of Roy challenging this taboo, there is now a flourishing critical realist literature devoted to constructive discussion and debate of matters religious and spiritual and promoting religious literacy and tolerance. On the atheist side, an exemplary model for participating in this debate is the work of Jamie Morgan, who has been sharply critical of the claims of both religion and metaRealism but on the basis of deep immanent understanding. There are plenty of models for how not to conduct it, i.e. in an attitude of self-righteous indignation and intolerance. There has even been talk of nasty schisms and a great deal of orientalist nonsense about Roy being a 'guru' of a CR 'cult'. Indeed, until recently, in Jamie's apt phrase, 'alienated hostility' has been dominant in the reception of the spiritual turn. One very material consequence of this was that Roy – the most brilliant of critical realists – couldn't even get a proper academic job when he really needed one in the last twelve years or so of his life. Mutual tolerance and respect is of course what is needed in this area – so long as it doesn't preclude constructive critique, which is the lifeblood of CR.

Solange – Why did Roy decide to write about metaReality? What were his motivations?

Mervyn – I've already discussed Roy's motives for the spiritual turn in general in my answer to your third question. The question now is: Why specifically the philosophy of metaReality? Basically, while the 'transcendental dialectical critical realism' of *From East to West* (2000) that launched Roy's spiritual turn did the necessary metaphysical heavy lifting for the transition to metaRealism, it did not satisfy the hermetic principle 'that it should be applicable to and verifiable by everyone and in the context of everyday life', as Roy has put it. So it was necessary to remedy this and to elaborate the bases of the new outlook and provide complex argumentation and justification for it. This was accomplished in the three metaReality books published in 2002: *From Science to Emancipation*, *Reflections on MetaReality*, and *The Philosophy of MetaReality: Creativity, Love and Freedom*. It should be noted that the main philosophical method deployed is the same as that followed in providing justification for BCR and DCR: transcendental argument plus immanent critique. There is no basis that I can detect for the view held by some that, starting with DCR, Roy was transformed from a postmetaphysical underlabourer into a speculative metaphysician and master-builder. His position all long has been a post-postmetaphysical one, with emphasis on the historical relativity, conditionality and fallibility of results.



Solange – Roy passed away last year. How do you see the future without him? How do you see the future for critical realists?

Mervyn – Roy will be remembered I think for three great achievements. First, at the level of philosophy, his system provides the most adequate solution to the post-Kantian problems of that discipline that anyone has yet arrived at. This is actually the working hypothesis of a brilliant young American philosopher, now located in the UK, Dustin McWherter. If borne out it will rank Roy above the likes of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida. Second, at the level of metatheory Roy's work provides the most adequate framework that we have for orienting the work of the sciences in a manner conducive to human flourishing. Finally, at the level of metacritique, it articulates the most thoroughgoing and devastating critique ever penned of capitalist modernity, and offers a roadmap out of it.

Roy's death is of course a great loss to the international critical realist movement. But Roy lives on in his work, and the show must go on and is going on. CR is currently on a roll in many areas of human enquiry in many regions of the planet, and this will undoubtedly quicken as more and more people come to understand that many aspects of the metacrisis are indeed causally relatively intransitive to human enquiry and action and have their tipping points, and so require urgent attention if we are to have a sustainable future. The crisis system is one crisis that we are indeed all in together: the masters or 1% will have to change along with everyone else. Not long before he died, Roy completed a 70,000-word manuscript providing an accessible overview of his entire system, *Critical Realism in a Nutshell*. When it is published next year it will undoubtedly give a powerful boost to the promotion of CR. Although metaRealism goes beyond BCR and DCR, Roy held that it both presupposes, and is broadly presupposed by them, such that the three form a single system. This carries no implication, however, that deploying critical realist metatheory to orient your research entails accepting 'the whole package'. On the contrary, since the later phases presuppose the earlier, work making use of any of the phases in either their specificity or their constellational unity is equally valuable and important. Whatever CR work you do, it matters! Of course, emancipatory philosophy and science, while indispensable for a transition to eudaimonia, are not the only, or even the main, thing. If we are going to get very far with that project, philosophical and scientific work will need to be creatively articulated with proliferating social and political movements. Our greatest resource for building eudaimonia is people everywhere and their inexhaustible capacities for freedom, creativity, love and hope.