

Book Reviews

ROY BHASKAR, *A realist theory of science*, Brighton, Sussex, Harvester Press, 1978, (1st ed., 1975), 8vo, pp. 284, £3.95 (paperback).

ROY BHASKAR, *The possibility of naturalism: A philosophical critique of the contemporary human sciences*, Brighton, Sussex, Harvester Press, 1979, 8vo, pp. ix, 228, £3.95 (paperback).

Roy Bhaskar's two books represent a major breakthrough for the philosophy of the human sciences; a breakthrough that is as welcome as it is timely. The development of psychiatry in Britain has for many years been dominated by an empiricist tradition underpinned, for the last two decades, by the work of Sir Karl Popper and his disciples. As a result a rather narrow and constricted form of academic psychiatry has been dominant. While this school of empiricist psychiatry has not been without its achievements, it has focused exclusively on positivistic research, showing little interest in, or understanding of the contribution of the psychoanalytic tradition. Indeed it has tended to denounce psychoanalysis as being unscientific and unworthy of serious attention.

In these two books, Roy Bhaskar develops a new epistemological foundation for science in general and the human sciences in particular, and in doing so lifts the Popperian yoke from the shoulders of the human sciences. For the first time an adequate means of conceptualizing the scientificity of human sciences such as psychoanalysis has been developed.

In *A realist theory of science* Bhaskar begins by presenting a devastating critique of what he calls the "empirical realist" theory of the nature of scientific laws. From David Hume to Popper this theory has seen scientific laws as being nothing more than shorthand descriptions of the conjunctions of events that constitute their empirical grounds. Bhaskar demonstrates that this conception of scientific laws is inadequate since it provides no means of guaranteeing the *reality* of the phenomena described by science. If scientific laws are ultimately reducible to their empirical grounds they cannot have an existence independent of men, since men's perception constitutes those empirical grounds.

If we had no guarantee of the reality of the phenomena described by science, experimental activity and applied science would be incomprehensible. Arguing from the premiss that both such activities *are* comprehensible, Bhaskar develops a more adequate characterization of the nature of scientific laws. Scientific laws are descriptions of "generative mechanisms" that underlie events. He argues further that science has always been more concerned with *explaining* the world than in predicting what will happen. Moreover science provides us with stratified levels of explanation – (from the chemical, to the molecular, to the atomic, for example) – which correspond to real levels of stratification in the natural world.

In *The possibility of naturalism* Bhaskar applies these arguments to the human sciences with extremely fruitful results. First he convincingly argues that both the

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method of explanation and the nature of scientific laws in the human sciences in no way differ from those in the natural sciences. Scientific laws in the human sciences describe generative mechanisms that underlie events. For example, the Freudian Unconscious is a description of a number of generative mechanisms that underlie psychological events. The human sciences differ from the natural sciences only in the means by which hypotheses are tested. The human sciences are denied decisive experimental test situations, but instead test hypotheses *empirically* by means of their explanatory power.

Building on his arguments about the stratified nature of reality and science, Bhaskar then develops a persuasive anti-reductionist argument, which effectively demolishes the claims made by Weber and Popper, amongst others, that social explanations are ultimately reducible to explanations about individuals. He lucidly demonstrates that social phenomena must possess real causal effectivity.

Perhaps the most exciting section in *The possibility of naturalism* is the chapter on 'Agents' in which Bhaskar demonstrates with great clarity and vigour that reasons *are* causes, thereby challenging a shibboleth that has bedevilled so much research in psychology and psychiatry. In demonstrating that reasons are causes Bhaskar creates a space for a true psychology, a space that has all too often been occupied in the past by behaviourism or a specious biologism.

Disavowing positivism, Bhaskar demonstrates that the only adequate means of testing a theory in the human sciences is by reference to its explanatory power. Disavowing the hermeneutic tradition, he argues that theories must have an empirical basis in reality and be testable, rather than be judged by special criteria founded on an epistemology of meaning. In sailing such an elegant course between the distractions of positivism and hermeneutics, Bhaskar charts out an exciting future for the human sciences.

One major implication of his argument is that it should now be possible to develop an adequate *typology* of the social and psychological sciences. This field has, up till recently, been so dominated by sectarianism, reductionism, and polemic that the central question of the pertinence and explanatory power of different theories has not been adequately addressed. Bhaskar's work implies that the theories of behaviourism, psychoanalysis, or cognitive psychology, for example, each describe, more or less adequately, a certain stratum of generative mechanisms that underlie human behaviour and experience. What is urgently required is the construction of an adequate typology by means of which these areas of explanatory efficacy can be described and articulated.

Anyone with an interest in the history and future of the human sciences should read these crucial books.

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M. A. SCREECH, *Rabelais*, London, Duckworth, 1979, 8vo, pp. xviii, 494, £35.00

Law-student, ex-monk, genial friar, scholar, doctor, diplomat, family man, and best-selling author, Rabelais strikes us today as perhaps the most approachable of the