

**ONTOLOGY AND METHODOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY  
PHILOSOPHY OF SOCIAL SCIENCE:  
STATUS QUAESTIONIS**

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Nowadays many social scientists will describe themselves as pluralists. Up to which extent have philosophers of social science provided those social scientist with tools and reflections that could help them to make their points of view (philosophically) more explicit? As an introduction to this issue on *Critical Realism and explanatory pluralism in the social sciences* I will (a) enumerate the questions put central in this issue and communicated to the contributors, (b) develop briefly how these questions involve central debates on ontology and methodology in the contemporary philosophy of social science, and (c) give the reader an outline of the contributions to this issue and how they relate to the central questions.

In developing a framework for (explanatory) pluralism in the social sciences, its limits and possibilities, you will always be confronted with the classical dichotomies of social analysis (structure versus agency, *Verstehen* versus *Erklären*, nomothetic versus idiographic, holism versus individualism, objective versus subjective, etc.). Recent contributions to the philosophy of social science have emphasized how, in dealing with these classical dichotomies, the ontological component has to be distinguished from the methodological component. This point is clearly articulated by Critical Realists and by scholars that suggested a non-reductive physicalism for the social sciences (we will return to these two players in contemporary philosophy of social science later in this

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introduction).

In order to develop a more complete account of methodological similarities and differences between Critical Realism and a non-reductive physicalism in the social sciences, and the extent to which they can contribute to the understanding of (explanatory) pluralism, I have invited four scholars to focus on one (or more) of the following questions (or related matters) mentioned:

- To what extent can ontological and methodological problems be distinguished. What is the impact of a realist ontology on methodological prescriptions?
- Causation versus explanation in the social sciences, e.g. does a higher-level explanation always presuppose higher-level causation?
- How to understand higher-level causation (top-down versus bottom-up)?
- How to use of the concepts of supervenience and emergence in social theory?
- Do both approaches (Critical Realism and non-reductive physicalism) use the concept of *social mechanism* differently?
- Which explanatory standard could or should be defended: an explanatory pluralism (explanations are either formulated in individual terms, in structural terms, or in a combination of both) or a form of explanatory relationism (explanation always give an account of the interpenetration or interplay of agency and structure)?
- Is a social scientist mainly interested in how to get started (methods) or in getting an account on what there is (ontological issues) prior to the research?
- Do references to analogies with the mind-body debate help us to understand the structure-agency relation?

Before giving an outline of how the contributors have responded to one (or more) of these central questions, I will briefly develop how these questions involve central debates on ontology and methodology in the contemporary philosophy of social science, and start with the introduction of the two players in the contemporary philosophy of social science we are focussing on in this issue.

Critical Realism has been described as a 'broad church' (Potter and Lopez, 2001:5) and is most closely associated with the work of Roy

Bhaskar. Other important contributors in the development of this Critical Realism in the social sciences are Rom Harré, Margaret Archer, Tony Lawson, Andrew Collier, Alan Norrie etc. It experiences a growing success in the social scientific disciplines e.g. sociology (e.g. Margaret Archer, Justin Cruickshank, Mats Ekström, etc.), economics (e.g. Tony Lawson, Steve Fleetwood, Jochen Runde, etc.), history (e.g. Christopher Lloyd), international relations theory (e.g. Heikki Patomäki, Colin Wight, etc.), ... . The main features of Critical Realism will be addressed and clarified in the contributions to this issue. Critical Realism has been welcomed by many as *the* way out of postmodernism in post-Hempelian times, but whether it lives up to that label is not uncontroversial, as some of the contributions in this issue will prove.

Non-reductive physicalism has its roots in the discussions in the philosophy of mind, but its ideas have expanded towards the philosophy of social sciences as well. A good deal of work in this direction has been done by Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit, who have sketched an ontology of causal fundamentalism using the ideas of global supervenience and the programme model of causal relevance (which ascribes causal relevance to higher levels -chemical, biological, psychological, social- that (non-reductively) supervene on the physical one and ascribes causal efficacy to the lower levels). Given this metaphysical outlook (an instance of *Canberra-metaphysics*, cf. Michael Smith, Jack Smart, etc.), they defend an explanatory ecumenism (or pluralism) in which a lower-level (individual) explanation is not necessarily better than a higher-level (social/structural) explanation (in all occasions). In selecting the better explanation, some pragmatic factors -e.g. kinds of information (comparative or contrastive) required- are taken into account.

Discussing explanatory and methodological pluralism will lead to considering the ontological and methodological aspects, and the relation between them, of Critical Realism and non-reductive physicalism. Before giving an outline of the contributions, we would like to emphasize the importance of the distinction (up to the degree possible) between ontological and methodological debates in the philosophy of social science. Let us first start with summing up some of the topics of the central debates on ontology and methodology in the contemporary philosophy of social science.

Ontological discussions are, e.g.:

- the idea of *emergence* defended by many Critical Realists and the idea of *supervenience* as present in the non-reductive physicalism (in the social sciences); the society/person connection;
- different concepts of *causation* (bottom-up and/or top-down);
- *causal efficacy* versus *causal relevance* (e.g. among Critical Realists there is a majority that agrees that some account of social structure as a causally efficacious entity is necessary for an adequate explanation of social reality).

Discussions on methodological options concern:

- *models* of explanation (*Covering Law* model, mechanisms, contrastive explanations, narratives, etc.);
- the idea of *explanatory pluralism* (compatibility and complementarity of forms of explanation);
- the importance of *pragmatics* of explanation in choosing the form of explanation;
- the identification of *mechanisms, structures, regularities or laws*;
- methodological individualism and its contenders;
- the use of *statistical models*.

Thanks to Critical Realism (amongst others), a lot of attention has been paid to ontological issues in the social sciences. Some contributions will explore how these ontological aspects can be further explored, and an improved account elaborated, in social theory and the social sciences, namely the contributions of José Mauricio Domingues, Shaun Le Boutellier and Tamas Demeter. Secondly, the relation between those two sets of discussions, the relation between causation and explanation, has been a topic of discussion, but there is still a lot of work left to make this relation more explicit. First steps will be taken in the contributions of Jeroen Van Bouwel, Jonathan Pratschke and Demeter. Finally, the methodological toolkit of both Critical Realism and non-reductive physicalism can be extended, as will be defended by Pratschke and Van Bouwel.

For this issue of *Philosophica*, we did not only invite philosophers, as we really wanted to discuss these topics with social scientists doing empirical research in order to avoid an alienation of the actual practice, and stimulate interaction between theory and social research, and between

different research programs. As such, we hope the philosophical discussions will be informed by social scientific practice. Let us now outline the contributions.

In his contribution to this issue, Jonathan Pratschke questions the scepticism of Critical Realists in relation to the use of statistical models in social scientific research. By providing an internal critique of the writings of Roy Bhaskar and Tony Lawson and demonstrating that their antipathy towards statistical research methods is not inherent in their social ontology, Pratschke points at the importance to embrace and the possibility to develop a methodological pluralism within the Critical Realist perspective. Moreover, he shows that Critical Realism can make a significant contribution to statistical research methods.

José Mauricio Domingues undertakes in his contribution an ontological *tour de force* in developing the concepts of *collective subjectivities* and *collective causality*. By putting collective subjectivities central and recognizing the role of collective causality in social life as a property of social systems, Domingues elaborates an alternative to individualism, structuralism and functionalism. Epistemologically he underwrites a 'realist conception', positively mentioning the Aristotelian influences in Bhaskar's Critical Realism, though critical of possible structural tendencies, conceptual reification as well as the idea of emergent properties as defended by Margaret Archer.

Shaun Le Boutellier does develop a critique of Archer's account as well. He focuses in his contribution to this issue on Margaret Archer's analytical dualism and her use of the idea of emergence. Archer considers the parts of the society, the 'social structure' and the 'Cultural System' as being objective and relatively autonomous 'entities'. Le Boutellier does not have a problem with Archer's account of the social structural emergent properties of the morphological or social structures, but wants to question her conviction that the cultural emergent properties of the Cultural System are to be analysed in the same way. He puts emphasis on the importance of distinguishing and disentangling two types of structures, the morphological or social (concerning resource distribution) and the cultural (concerning beliefs, values, ideas, roles, rules and other products of socialisation). Subsequently he demonstrates how something very different (in terms of reduction, emergent properties, and supervenient relations) is happening in one case to that which is happening in the other, and asks for more attention for the understanding

and interpretation of actions and motives, and for cultural aspects of social life in general. The implications for social theory and social explanation are fundamental, and in need of serious attention.

While Domingues and Le Boutillier were focussing mainly on ontological issues, I discuss in my contribution the relation between ontological and methodological issues and how this relation has been understood in the philosophy of social science. While I agree with the unveiling of the *epistemic fallacy*, as has been done by Critical Realism, I question whether the alternatives developed by Roy Bhaskar and Tony Lawson possibly commit an *ontological fallacy*. Subsequently, I evaluate the Critical Realist's ideas on social scientific explanation, discuss the relation with their unveiling of the epistemic fallacy, and analyse how these ideas were implemented in different social scientific disciplines (economics, sociology, international relations theory and history). After exposing some lacunae of the Critical Realist's contributions concerning scientific explanation, I suggest to consider the pragmatics of explanations in order to understand the pluralism of the explanatory practice, and reconsider the ontological stance taken by Critical Realism (based on the transcendental argument). This will lead to an opening towards explanatory pluralism, and a role for Pettit's version of non-reductive physicalism as an ontological framework.

Tamas Demeter tackles possible threats for explanations in the social sciences, and the special sciences in general, namely if special-science properties are reduced to physical properties, then they surrender their causal powers to physical ones, and thus there will be no serious metaphysical background for the special sciences, no proper domain to be studied by them. Rebutting this scenario, he develops an account of the nature of special-science properties, their relations to each other and to more fundamental properties, and the explanatory role they can play. More specifically, Demeter sketches a physicalist metaphysics that avoids this scenario by relying on a non-domain-specific global supervenience thesis, which grants a special ontological status to the physical but remains neutral about higher levels. Subsequently he advertises the 'programme model' of special-science explanation, as developed by Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit, that fits this metaphysics fairly well: it allows us to draw and re-draw the boundaries between subvenient and supervenient properties so as to satisfy our explanatory curiosity. As such, a good metaphysical background for an ecumenical view of

explanation in general, and special-sciences explanations in particular, is provided.

We hope these contributions will provide the social scientists with tools that help them make their points of view philosophically more explicit, and incite philosophers to discuss Critical Realism, non-reductive physicalism and explanatory pluralism in the social sciences. It involves discussing which options are available in these post-Hempelien times, and which alternatives can be found to come after postmodernism (cf. Potter and Lopez, 2001) within the philosophy of the social sciences.

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