

# Enlightened common sense: the philosophy of critical realism

Harvey Shoolman

To cite this article: Harvey Shoolman (2017): Enlightened common sense: the philosophy of critical realism, Journal of Critical Realism, DOI: [10.1080/14767430.2017.1340011](https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2017.1340011)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2017.1340011>



Published online: 07 Jul 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 13



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## REVIEW

**Enlightened common sense: the philosophy of critical realism**, by Roy Bhaskar and edited with a preface by Mervyn Hartwig, London, Routledge, 2016, 244 pp., £24.29 (softback), ISBN: 978-0415583794

When we learned of the death of Roy Bhaskar on 14th November 2014, the world appeared to turn a little more slowly and more darkly. Something rare and precious had been taken from us and those, like myself, who had never had the fortune to meet him, cleaved ever more tightly to the books and ideas that he left as his legacy. Bhaskar's oeuvre is of a daunting magnitude, with 15 substantial monographs expounding various aspects and three developmental phases of his philosophy of critical realism. Although his admirers and philosophical epigones are not all card-carrying devotees – some being happy to remain in one rather than all of the three broad conceptual phases of critical realism – no one can question the depth, complexity and innovatory power of his work. However, Bhaskar's prose is famously difficult, due to its tendency to fissiparous conceptualization, extensive architectonic divisions and sub-divisions and a neologistic flair that approaches the status of high art. All of this is crowned by a profligate use of acronyms that can drive neophytes to distraction and have them reaching for the nearest available copy of Hartwig's blessed (2007) *Dictionary of Critical Realism*.

What is more, many of Bhaskar's ideas assume a background familiarity with technical philosophical jargon accumulated over several millennia. His work therefore encompasses the ideas of the metaphysical Greeks, the medieval scholastics, the continental idealists, post-Hegelians, post-Heideggerians and Husserlian phenomenologists; eventually culminating in the latest post-Fregean semantics employed by Anglo-American analytical philosophers. His range of reference is as broad and deep as the genealogy of philosophy itself and this inevitably runs the risk of alienating those coming to critical realism from other disciplines where the words 'epistemic' and 'ontological' might as well be written in Sanskrit.

It is therefore, at least from a hermeneutic point of view, somewhat fitting that Bhaskar's last completed work should be an abbreviated 'summa' of all that has gone before. Although it is predictably demanding, the overwhelming impression is that this is far more an 'homage' to Bhaskar's commitment to conceptual holism and systematic reticulation than it is to any desire to provide pedagogic clarity and simplicity of formulation for the uninitiated. However, regardless of the evident challenges posed by the text, what is of no doubt is that the community of critical realists, as well the wider reading public, and above all those future students of his ideas approaching his ideas for the first time, will be forever grateful to Bhaskar for writing this book in the teeth of progressive heart-failure. They will be similarly grateful to Mervyn Hartwig – a tireless and brilliant disseminator of Bhaskar's thought – for editing it so ably.

So, what have we been given? *Enlightened Common Sense* (henceforth ECS in acronymic deference to the author) is nothing less than a superb synthesis and relatively concise overview of the main phases of Bhaskar's work. It is a textual revelation of both the diachronic development of his ideas and a synchronic conspectus of their inter-relationships. Indeed, if one were to read this volume with the marvellous Bhaskar/Hartwig (2010) *Formation of Critical Realism*:

*A Personal Perspective* by one's side, one would have the perfect biographical and conceptual introduction to the critical realist system. Mindful as I am of the journal in which this review is appearing and the familiarity of its readers with Bhaskar's ideas, I have no intention to preach to the converted or to lecture to the already wise and informed. However, it might be worth making a few points as to what it is the reasonably attentive reader will gain from a close perusal of this volume.

In just over 200 pages, Bhaskar covers every aspect of his critical realist project, taking the reader through its successive developmental and programmatic phases and culminating in an invigorating chapter that situates critical realism in relation to the history of philosophy as a whole. As I have already implied, though the book is very much a *summa rationis* of Bhaskar's philosophical development it is not exactly a cosy vade mecum for the uninitiated. I would not recommend this book to a neophyte without a health-warning, given the sheer density and elevated conceptual temperature of the writing. The main advantage of this precious last work and the reason it should be owned and regularly consulted by critical realists of all stripes lies simply in its synoptic ambition as a tour 'd'horizon' of a vast conceptual landscape that has been overwhelmingly planted, nutritiously cultivated and given its current morphology by the author himself.

Now that we have the landscape before us, ECS allows us to see what its author has wrought and on completing a reading of the book one is left in undoubted admiration for the philosophical fertility and power of Bhaskar's mind. The reach of the book and the critical realist project as a whole is of an ambition and conceptual audacity not seen since Hegel, and in some respects Bhaskar exceeds the reach of Hegel himself. We begin with a new paradigmatic philosophy that re-situates the activity of science within an overwhelmingly naturalistic paradigm and are propelled forward into the antechamber of a cosmological dialecticism whose ambition is nothing less than to reify the ontological and epistemic primordially of a systemic holism that transcends the dualism of subject and object. We then end our philosophical roller coaster with the detailed vision of the 'generalised co-presence' and psycho-physical interconnectedness of all things. That is some ride and, I would contend, more than worth the price of admission entailed by the concentration and dedication required of the reader.

Indeed, progressing through the pages of the book one begins to realize the enormity of the loss philosophy has sustained by Bhaskar's death. Beginning in the 1970s, with his attack on Humean empiricism and the driving of ontology by epistemology, one relishes as well as admires Bhaskar's forensic destruction of the 'epistemic fallacy' that so dominated philosophy of science. This was accompanied by his rejection, root and branch, of the world-view that came bundled with it; namely that there is a homogeneous, ontologically 'flat', unstructured and essentially static cosmos in which all human life and ambition are conducted. Critical realism united 'what' there is to know and its influence on 'how' we come to know and in so doing restored a primordial human appreciation of the universe as infinitely vast, complex, multiply stratified and a continual revelation to experimental probing and the quest of the human mind to understand. 'What does the world need to be like in order for our experiments to generate the seemingly ambiguous diversity of results that they do?' By asking this seemingly innocent question, Bhaskar initiated almost a Copernican revolution that changed the way that we understand the world. Bhaskar persuasively combined a Kantian transcendental argument-form with an immanent critique of scientific method in order to give birth to the critical realist project. One of the implications of this paradigmatic change is that scientific experimentation, and explanation, had now to be seen as a socially and communally 'transitive' practise that is itself formally and substantively determined by the existence of an often recalcitrant, protean, multi-layered and complexly 'intransitive' universe. Such a universe will always be 'deeper' and more nuanced in its causal power-generating

structure than is capturable by any one scientific or experimental question that any scientist can ask of it. Consequently, the answers or humanly constructed 'data' that Nature gives back often appear inconsistent, ambiguously diverse and redolent of further questioning and ever more radical explanatory hypotheses to be framed. Science is progressive because Nature is dynamically protean and heterogeneously powerful in the vast repertoire of possible causal responses and effects it is capable of generating. If Bhaskar's ontology was realistic, his epistemology was relative and his hermeneutic approach, severely rational. Above all, science must be seen as a profoundly and essentially 'human' activity and necessarily distinct from the holistically stratified universe it seeks to relate to, epistemically. We simply cannot reduce the universe to habitually conjugated patterns of anthropomorphically constructed 'events'. 'What is' cannot be reduced to 'What I or we think it is'. Rather, science is a creative and 'human all too human' activity that progresses according to the conceptual innovativeness and human artistry with which we question nature and construct plausible causal hypotheses to explain the phenomenal diversity that nature reveals to us. For Bhaskar, there is both an explanatory as well as ontological 'dialectic' at work in the ongoing history of scientific explanation as, gradually, a continuously enriched cosmological structure is revealed to a paradigmatically shifting human way of coming to psycho-physically understand and interact with that world.

Nature is endlessly generative of causal powers and effects, as is the human mind infinitely constructive of hypothetical mechanisms and models designed to explain the works of those causal powers. Nature does not simply reveal the finished blueprint of an infinitely stratified structure but it palpably and necessarily behaves dynamically. Our ontological constructs must therefore embrace the concepts of 'change' and 'process' as well as those of structure and complexity. Where you have structured complexity and an ontological dynamic you then necessarily come face to face with the concept and reality of 'emergence'. This ontological dynamic and the concomitant dialectical relationship between knower and known, with the inevitable dynamic instability that implies, results in the necessary foregrounding of the importance, for Bhaskar, of the 'social'. If science is indeed a human and therefore a social and 'communal' practice, then any understanding of phenomena must include both the knower and the way that knower comes to his or her understanding, seen as part of a viable and rationally coherent explanatory naturalism.

ECS beautifully and parsimoniously describes and explains the three main 'phases' of critical realism in terms of basic critical realism, dialectical critical realism and meta-reality, and the subdivisions within each phase, such as transcendental realism, critical naturalism and explanatory critique. It includes the 'transitional' relationships between these phases, although emphasis is given in the book to basic critical realism. The basic credo that Bhaskar is intent on promulgating, whether in natural philosophy or social science, is that *it is the nature of the object that determines how it should be studied by the subjective mind of the knower*. This ontological and epistemic credo contains within it the essence of the Bhaskarian world-view. As one reads this book one is continually prodded into thinking that Bhaskar's relation to Kant is isomorphic to Marx's relation to Hegel. Bhaskar's early work literally inverted Kantian transcendentalism and repudiates the notion that 'how' we are as cognitive beings itself determines and mediates what experience, and hence knowledge, we have of a reality that must always elude us in terms of its ultimate essence. Bhaskar replaces that subjective epistemic with the philosophical understanding of a reality, the very dynamic and processual complexity of which, mediates and determines the parameter-space within which our knowledge of reality is possible. In other words, reality morphogenetically determines and drives our epistemology, a Copernican inversion that reminds one inevitably of the way in which Marx found it necessary to materially ground and concretize the Hegelian dialectic of human mind and universal spirit and so instantiate that reciprocal dualism within the tectonic movement of historical events and

the constructed technologies which necessarily shape human consciousness and ideology. For readers of this journal, I need not go into details of Bhaskar's understanding of the 'transapplicability' of critical realism from the natural to the social sciences and the 'transformational' model of the way in which social activity is both pre-existing and continuously changed by human agency. The take-home message that Bhaskar's work continually transmits to the reader is that societies and social events are as much naturalistic components of the universal order as are any other structured phenomena. They are equally complex and immanently labile and are changed 'by' as well as transformative 'of' those social scientists, politicians, civil servants, bureaucrats, technocrats, business people and plain Joes on the Clapham omnibus that compose such social complexes. Indeed, social phenomena are even more recalcitrant to the knowing mind than so called natural phenomena, for they are not only generatively opaque in terms of the causal powers that produce them, but they are also deeply sensitive contextually and hence far less amenable to the establishing of experimentally closed systematic investigation. What is more, social reality is activity – and concept – sensitive as well as being far more constrained spatio-temporally than other natural phenomena. This has the effect of rendering any social hermeneutic as both ontologically (and consequently epistemically) 'enfolded' within the phenomenal envelope that hermeneutic purports to study and render perspicuous to the human mind. For any Bhaskarian realist, *verstehen* is therefore a far more delicately nuanced activity than is *wissenschaft*.

Another message that the reader cannot help absorbing from this book is the importance of what Bhaskar provocatively termed 'seriousness' in philosophical life. Seriousness is, for Bhaskar, a basic requirement of intellectual virtue and probity. It insists that we unite theory and practice in a fused *praxis* that gives appropriate respect to the importance of the philosophical quest for enlightenment. Philosophy is therefore not simply a remote armchair-bound pursuit removed conveniently from the possibly negative and discomforting consequences of our theorizing; but it is a practical and ultimately a utilitarian propaedeutic to the achieving of a transformative and salvific understanding of how things actually 'are' between the knowing human mind and the natural order that generated that mind. This relationship continuously fructifies the human mind as part of the very same multiply stratified and dynamic reality that is cause and reason, both of the existence of subject and object, and of the possible transcending of that, ultimately misplaced, duality. Though one might assume that Kant, Hegel, Marx and Sankara are the tutelary spirits behind the genealogy of critical realism, I would also like to suggest that Spinoza be increasingly studied as an influence on Bhaskar given the centrality of concepts such as structural dynamism, emergence, the mereological expressivism of human and other modal parts to that of Nature itself, the transcending of subject and object and the virtuousness of adequate and clear knowledge in Spinoza's mature thinking as revealed in his magnum opus, the *Ethics*.<sup>1</sup> In ECS (100–1) Bhaskar does briefly describe what he calls the 'Spinozan Moment' of transformative understanding in which false dualisms are superseded and ultimately eliminated in a cognitively enhanced form of agent-praxis.

Many have found the dialectical phase of the Bhaskarian system to be difficult, rebarbatively obscure or simply confusing and there is no doubt that both *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom* (1993) and chapter 6 of ECS make severe demands on the reader patience and attention. However, the treatment of dialectic in ECS is definitely the more exegetically and discursively palatable of the two alternatives. This is because ECS easily, and relatively quickly, establishes how the dialectical phase of Bhaskar's thought relates to what went before and what came after. That very capability brings a degree of clarity and illumination to the task of understanding this impressively detailed and conceptually innovative phase of Bhaskar's system, for a system it very much is; and one becomes aware, on deeper reading of ECS, of the degree to which Bhaskarian dialectics is of a conceptual and methodological piece with basic critical

realism and meta-reality. Bhaskarian dialectic involves a rejection of ontological 'monovalence' and instead advocates for the ontological and epistemic importance of that inter-linked conceptual trioka: *absence*, *negativity* and *presence*. A powerful case is made for including negativity and absence as ontologically, and therefore explanatorily, potent in the intransitive natural order; as well as in the transitive context of human subjectivity and social experience. We learn that the generative negates or sublates the absent as well as negating the pre-existent, which accordingly, is understood as an underlying and yet ever changing continuant. Dialectic does not, for Bhaskar, simply involve the redistribution of parts within the natural order but it betokens the emergence of novelty, particularly evident within the social context, and this in itself requires that we forge the concept of *transformation* in order to systematically encapsulate that phenomenon. The conceptual dialectic of absence, negativity and presence allows us to properly come to terms with an infinitely labile cosmological reality that is multi-layered, ontologically discontinuous and tending to distinct transformative rupture as the foundation of generative emergence. What is important about Bhaskar's work is that it gives us the conceptual tools and the ontological 'vision' that enable us to explain and countenance social emergence and transformation in such a way that we are then able to cognitively widen our explanatory schema and fundamentally connect socially emergent phenomena with the infinitely more encompassing natural order, as part of a consistent and conceptually seamless explanatory naturalism that understands and situates all social phenomena as ultimately miniscule parts of that infinitely overarching and structurally generative cosmology. Bhaskar's ontology can therefore be understood as a powerful instantiation of what we might call *mereological holism* in which constitutive parts interact dialectically not only with each other but with the whole of which they form constituent, though sub-optimally 'real' parts. In so doing they both transform and are, in turn, transformed. This holism is both ontological and epistemic, which makes it both unique and important as a dialectically 'polysemic' form of explanation. It is this holism that accounts for the bipolarity of both presence and absence as defining properties of changing continuants; as well as the historical genealogy that also provides an explanatory causal narrative determining the nature of pre-existent, pre-labile continuity and the causal generation of morphogenetic novelty in the world. What is more, the use by Bhaskar of the concept of dialectical 'negation' in tandem with that of 'absence' allows him to fashion nothing less than an ontologically grounded axiology of being. Thus, deprivation and sub-optimality (the experience of poverty or rain deprived soil conditions for example) induce the social or natural movement towards transformative change and the stimulation of nature's causal powers in a productively beneficent way. This enables the achievement of holistic optimality and homeostatic equilibrium in nature, or justice and equality in society. In this sense, Bhaskar's work follows ideologically, as well as philosophically, in the tradition of Hegel and Marx. Speaking personally, I have found it to be far more insightful and conceptually persuasive than Sartre's attempt to produce an ideologically acceptable critique of dialectical reason. This is because Bhaskar's dialectic is profoundly linked to a metaphysical naturalism and a coherent cosmological world-view that gives it far greater conviction and explanatory power. The true logic of emancipation is thereby rendered far more scientifically acceptable and philosophically perspicuous as both a concept and a practice.

Metaphysically, Bhaskar was also an abstract realist who did not believe in a transcendent world of Platonic forms but rather in a world in which abstract concepts are 'concretized' or embedded in specific morphological structures that specifically differentiate the existence of transfactually applicable properties. That very structural specificity is further instantiated and expressed via a genealogical causal narrative that accounts for the ultimate uniqueness of any universally concretized properties in the world order. To put it simply: no two Mars bars are 'exactly' the same. The dialectical holism with which Bhaskar operates connects and

relates the constituent 'parts' of systems 'intra-actionally' rather than 'inter-actionally'. In other words, change is both causally immanent as well as causally transitive. This applies importantly to concepts such as 'meaning' and 'truth' which are considered by Bhaskar to be inherently relative and labile as are ontological structures. In this way, the dialectical embraces and enfolds within itself the analytical which, in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition, influenced as it is overwhelmingly by positivist considerations, has shown a historical tendency to believe in the static and unwavering rigidity of meaning as a semantic concept. In this sense, Bhaskar believes that what he calls dialectical 'constellationality' includes, enfolds or embraces the analytic within it as a form of *aufheben* or Hegelian-like 'sublation'. However, unlike the Hegelian dialectic, CR dialectics begins with a labile cosmological reality whose properties and ultimate meaning are essentially irreducible and non-essential. One therefore starts from non-identity and a non-reified and polymorphous concept of negativity. Bhaskar's universe is essentially Heraclitean; and thought, agency and spontaneously occurring intentionality are thereby understood as constituent elements of what it means to exist at all, both naturalistically as well as socially. Bhaskar's fundamental assault is upon the analytical ontology and narrative hermeneutic of stasis, meaning-rigidity and Parmenidean-inspired invariance that together foster the restrictive, confining and socially controlling relations of power, influence, affluence and hegemonic domination that pervade the social universe.

Bhaskar's holism is, in this sense, both unremitting and socially progressive. He sees any tendency towards de-totalization as having the effect of undermining the importance and efficacy of change in the world. His consistent assault upon the analytic and the atomistic is not simply a progressive movement in the direction of intellectual enlightenment. It is rather a profoundly constitutive characteristic of the quest for human freedom and self-control. Yet, at the same time, Bhaskar is equally intent upon combatting the impoverished and deeply fallacious 'anthropocentrism' and 'anthroporealism' that holds the human mind in the iron-embrace of a pre-Copernican vision of the world and of our relationship to the cosmic world order. Bhaskar's nightmare is the static, axiologically barren, uniform, repetitive and serf-like existence of the 'McDonalised World'. One suspects his reaction to a 'Donald' in the White House would have been predictably scathing.

As far as Bhaskar is concerned, we can only foster the free-flourishing of the human mind and body and the social body politic as part of a dialectically reciprocal holism and union of inter-subjective minds and bodies that understands that the freedom of each is a necessary condition for the freedom and psycho-physical flourishing of all. Such flourishing also requires morphogenetic insight and control and the rational understanding of both nature's and our own causally generative powers. Science and philosophy then take their place as parts of what Bhaskar calls a 'totalising depth praxis' that understands knowledge-acquisition as itself a central component of the human quest for structural freedom. Bhaskar's inspiring vision of dialectical freedom, beautifully explored and expressed in chapter 6, is of an ascending trellis of dialectically nested freedoms which begins with the simple contrarian ability to 'do otherwise' and culminates in a 'universal concretely singularized human autonomy or flourishing'. This may well be a typical example of Bhaskar's tendency to the verbal baroque but what it really stands for is the expression and realization of a truly 'eudaimonistic society', nothing less than the psycho-social realization of happiness and inter-subjective harmony that is in the direct lineage of Plato, Aristotle, Spinoza, Rousseau, Marx, Rawls and the philosophers of the East. Bhaskar is able to fuse ontology, epistemology and axiology in a seamless conceptual embrace which is an accomplishment that has the effect of completely dissolving the Humean 'naturalistic fallacy' as did the Greeks with their use of the 'telos' by which they could impose 'virtue' onto an otherwise oblivious cosmos.



A reading of ECS convinces one that much of Bhaskar's work is nothing less than a sustained 'revolt against dualism', against the 'irrealism' of those prejudicially false dichotomies such as 'subject and object', 'slavery and freedom' that lead to lives of qualitative subservience and mental constraint. The historically mediated dualisms between religion and spirituality, the sacred and the profane, the natural and the supernatural, are similar antinomies of control and psycho-physical restraint, as far as Bhaskar is concerned, and which his life and thought were dedicated to overcoming. His third-phase 'philosophy of meta-reality' is designed to accomplish such a psycho-physical re-orientation by first rendering identity as hegemonic with respect to difference and unity and second by postulating non-duality as transcendent with respect to any purported and deeply misleading schizoid cleavage between mind and body. Atomism and Parmenidean 'blockism' must be philosophically subordinated to the reality of space-time and the processuality that they entail. The universe and our lives as parts of that holism are inherently dynamic and immanently morphogenetic. Identity is consequently an arboreal and differentially expressive concept in Bhaskar's work.

The culmination of Bhaskar's meta-philosophy is surely the doctrine of 'generalised co-presence or interconnectedness', a form of systemic or mereological holism that collapses and interfuses the false dualisms indicated above. At this level of being and understanding, materiality is a pure form of ontological and epistemic inclusivity that enfolds or includes within it any and all forms of religious belief or, for that matter, non-belief. Social eudaimonism is therefore predicated on the essential dissolution of the 'I-Thou', 'Subject-Object', 'Self and Other' dualisms and on the instantiation of a 'logic of inter-implication' or entailment which predicates the fulfilment of 'self' and 'other' as being dialectically reciprocal. In this way, the social becomes enfolded implicationally within and expressed by the cosmological. This sort of dialectical eudaimonism is similar to the view of Spinoza, who believed that the human psycho-physical self was not only given whatever sub-optimal reality it has by the generative expressivity of an infinite nature (synonymous, for Spinoza, with God) but that the rational intuition of such a reality necessarily entails the construction of an overwhelmingly rational society, what we might call a 'rational *gemeinschaft*', based upon the inter-subjective fulfilment and flourishing of other rational minds. This important theme of dialectical heteronomy is also to be found in the liberal theory of justice developed by John Rawls.

The teleology at work here, for Bhaskar, is what we might call 'positive Weberianism' or the attaining of both an individual and collective psycho-physical state of 're-enchantment' of the world, the perception of a universe suffused with value, virtue and meaning. At such a point of hermeneutic singularity there exists generalized co-presence in which all dualities are transcended and there exists the realization of individual and cosmos or God. Once again, this is a profoundly Spinozistic vision as well as being a philosophical vision of great conceptual beauty.<sup>2</sup>

I hope that I have conveyed to the reader some of the riches enfolded within the pages of this remarkable book, reflective of a lifetime of deep and radically innovative thinking by its author. There is an obvious poignancy that attends the realization we will hear no more from this truly remarkable mind. In conclusion, I would like to make two points. First, everyone coming to Bhaskar's work for the first or the umpteenth time should be aware of the challenges Bhaskar had to face throughout his life as he fashioned the vast panoply of thought this book encapsulates. Bhaskar was forever an 'outsider' to established ways of thinking and to the academic and organizational establishment that attempted to marginalize and suppress the powerful heterodoxy of his ideas. Unfairly and cynically denied the imprimatur of an Oxford D.Phil, Bhaskar was the eponymous wandering scholar, forever searching for the learned haven that would appreciate his talent and provide a true *heimat* for the elaboration of his ideas. The unfortunate fact is that he never succeeded in finding that sustaining institutional



hospitality and respect; for much of Bhaskar's academic life was conducted under conditions of professional insecurity and financial asperity. Bhaskar was not the first, nor will he be the last, to suffer in this way. However, it is a salutary fact that such a profoundly talented and influential thinker was deprived of a professorial chair in the UK and had to be content with the grandiloquent title of 'World Scholar' at an institution that was only prepared to offer him a part-time contract of employment. The last 13 years of Bhaskar's life were conducted under the discomfiting auspices of ill health and relative penury. Of course, his sheer ebullience of spirit and loving kindness towards others were repaid by the love and friendship of those privileged to be close to him. This book, conceptually challenging and densely rich with ideas as it is, will remain the most authentic conspectus of the vast and powerfully transformative architecture of ideas bequeathed to us by this great thinker.

I would also like to pay compliment to the editor of this book, Mervyn Hartwig, whose dedication to critical realism, to the life and work of Bhaskar, and to the dissemination of critical realist theory continues to inspire and to instruct.

## Notes

1. I have recently completed a substantial monograph on Spinoza's mature philosophy of naturalistic explanation entitled *MindFul of Nature* (forthcoming), in which I provide a detailed discussion of these concepts as they relate to Spinoza's philosophy of mind and action.
2. For Spinoza also believed that the relative unreality of the modal human individual can only partake of the intellectualized experiencing of eternity by intuitively and rationally relating to nature in such a way that the individual human mind no longer perceives itself as an existing individuated psycho-physical 'subject' or ego. Instead, those previously human, fallacious and quotidian perceptions that normally constitute the substantive content of a specific human mind are extinguished by the overwhelmingly rational perception of the interconnection of all objects within the mind and extension of Nature as such. At the point of supremely rational meditation, which is the highest form of knowledge, the human mind becomes a part of the infinitely recursive thought that is the mind of Nature itself.

## References

Bhaskar, R., and M. Hartwig. 2010. *The Formation of Critical Realism: A Personal Perspective*. London: Routledge.

Hartwig, M. 2007. *Dictionary of Critical Realism*. London: Routledge.

Harvey Shoolman  
*Department of Politics and International Relations, Faculty of Social Sciences,*  
*London Metropolitan University, London, UK*  
 h.shoolman@londonmet.ac.uk

© 2017 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2017.1340011>

