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Abstract & Two-sentence Summary

Critical realism and the problem of (judgemental) rationality

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Abstract

Bhaskar (2007: 200) defines judgemental rationality, part of the holy trinity of critical realism, as “the idea that there are better or worse grounds for our beliefs”. So defined, judgemental rationality is an attribute of rationality that emerges from the fallibility of human cognition and the actuality of epistemic relativism, and that can be otherwise defined as variable cognitive fallibility. Judgemental rationality is therefore a misnomer because it is not a kind of rationality, at least not of rationality intended as the ability to assess the coherence between plausible propositional attitudes (e.g. beliefs, desires, intentions) and chosen actions. One implication is the import of apprehending the nature of rationality. For if judgemental rationality is not rationality, what does rationality consist in and of? The latter two questions are most relevant for agency. They are not questions, however, that Bhaskar seems to have directly addressed: much of his work treats rationality as if a monadic entity rather than a totality.

I will argue for an account of the ontological stratification of rationality that is premised on the duality of modal framing and logic. This account is complementary to the monadic view in that, in addition to being concerned with how rationality may intervene in social life, it is informed by what Elder-Vass (2007) calls the downwardly inclusive view of an entity – a view that extends to the components of an entity and to how their causal powers are synthesised into the causal powers of that totality. More precisely, I will argue that stratified or structured rationality is downwardly constituted by the interplay of modality (and the associated framing effect of belief and interest, subdivided into factual and moral belief, and individual and collective interest) and logic, intended as a process of triangulation from more than a premise to a single conclusion. The account of structured rationality that I defend here may enrich realist understandings of what rationality is and how it works. Examples of such contributions include how considerations of moral belief and of normative triangulation may help reveal criteria for rational theory choice, or the choice between competing accounts of a social phenomenon, in addition to the well-established notion of comparative explanatory power (Bhaskar, 2013; Isaksen, 2016). A rational theory choice criterion thus obtained is that of comparative normative coherence, or the relative coherence of a narrative with acceptable moral truth claims. Other examples include how structured rationality may integrate realist notions of rationality such as Lawson’s (1997) situated rationality, to forge a novel concept: structured situated rationality. Among the merits of structured situated rationality is that it helps reveal the roles played by moral and ontological silencing in the fallacies of mainstream economics, such as assuming that public service efficiency should be at the service of capital instead of society.

Two-sentence summary

I will argue that realist accounts of rationality may be enriched by considering how rationality emerges from the interplay of rational framing and logic. Here, rational framing entails the framing effect of factual and moral belief and individual and collective interest, while logic is intended as a process of triangulation from more than a premise to a conclusion.

References

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