

## **From Moments of Dialectic to Thought Forms and Back: Dialectical Critical Realism in the Social Sciences**

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Through this book, the author hopes to lay foundations for a novel kind of social science, one that is emancipatory rather than focused on status quo or status quo ante. The idea of the book derives from Roy Bhaskar's basic as well as dialectical Critical Realism (1979, 1993). The book provides the missing ontological grounding for Laske's DTF, the Dialectical Thought Form Framework, that has been taught at the Interdevelopmental Institute (IDM) since 2000. In the book, the author atones (so to speak) for insufficiently grounding his work ontologically, hoping thereby to put into bright light the extraordinary relevance of research in adult development and forms of dialectic for the transformation of the social sciences. By necessity, the book amounts to an immanent critique of Critical Realism in its present, Bhaskarian, form from a social-science point of view.

The book sets apart, as well as connects, Bhaskar's ontological MELD moments and Laske's epistemic DTF thought forms (TFs). It claims to lay out the ontological foundations of social science in the form of three kinds of dialectic (see below). Leading from the ontology of social reality to its epistemology "and back", it entails a backward or return movement TFs → MELD. In the author's view, both dialectical movements-in-thought are mandatorily intertwined in social science practice. However, they are presently either taboo or not grasped in their relevance for understanding social life. Only DTF's immediate pragmatic relevance for enhancing 'thought fluidity' – an ontological dead end leading directly into the epistemic fallacy -- has so far been acknowledged (Jan De Visch & Otto Laske, 2020; Shannon & Frischherz, 2020).

The meaning of the "and back" is at least twofold: it signals that human epistemology is both embedded in, and overreached by, ontology, given that epistemic concerns are those of persons deeply embedded in nature. In terms of McGilchrist's work on the human brain (2010), the movement back to MELD is synonymous with a left-hemispheric *return* to the holism and empathy of the right hemisphere that sponsors it, more explicitly with stopping the left hemisphere, a mere emissary of the brain's right hemisphere, from posturing as the master of algorithmic ceremonies wrongly referred to as 'thinking'.

**It should be said at the outset that the author accords exceedingly slim chances of success to social scientists who do not think adult-developmentally AND dialectically at the same time.**

At the present time, the capability to do so is an exceedingly rare commodity although without it understanding social reality remains a pipe dream. Social reality is an open, continuously emerging system [of systems] that is (unconsciously) reproduced and (consciously) transformed by human agency, as Bhaskar's transformational model of social activity (TMSA) indicates.

The TMSA model is centered in human agency, not in persons but in relationships between them. As this author's research has shown, human agency is by nature developmental, more

specifically adult-developmental. This truth is an alethic, not merely a propositional, one. It surfaces in the fact that over the adult lifespan ‘mind’ emerges from ‘matter’ in and from human bodies and dies away with them (except for artifacts created by it). That is to say that mind, social and/or individual, does not simply exist. As the developmental sciences have shown since 1975 (if not before), mind gradually *emerges* for and between individuals over a maximal lifetime of about 100 years. Unfortunately, this alethic truth has been and is being denied throughout the human and social sciences (including philosophy), to the great detriment not only of understanding reality but of harnessing nature’s complicity in acting upon the real world.

The developmental, emergent character of ‘mind’ has the dramatic consequence that social reality differs from natural reality in that it is not simply material but also conceptual. Realities that combine material and conceptual features are hermeneutically *interpretive* (and pre-interpreted). This entails that the interpretations of social reality human agents make are not derivative but constitutive of the reality being interpreted. (In the world of work, e.g., this means that the roles in an organizational position-practice system are not given but *made*, namely interpreted, and cannot be conceived of as detached from agents’ conception of their role which is of course developmentally determined; see De Visch & Laske 2020).

As a result, interpreting social reality is an integral part of the reality that is being interpreted, thus anchored in a double hermeneutic. This alethic truth alone sends merely logical thinking – left-hemisphere thinking – scrambling for an exit, an exit Bhaskar has named ‘the epistemic fallacy’ by which intransitive reality is reduced to transitive, human thought. Left-hemisphere reductive thinking, whether conducting itself positivistically or hermeneutically, denies the dialectical Moment 1M (First Moment) according to which the real world is highly stratified and non-identical with itself.

While this book follows Bhaskar’s basic and dialectical critical realism (CR), it substantially differs from present understandings of CR. This is made apparent by introducing into TMSA and four-planar social being an epistemic dialectic – that of DTF thought forms – (Bhaskar’s 2E), on one hand, and empirical findings about the adult developmental emergence of the ‘mind’ of human agents (Bhaskar’s 3L), on the other. Taken together, these two scientific approaches substantially alter, deepen, and revise Bhaskar’s notion of ‘human agency’ (4D). They do so by forcing an inquiry into the relationship of ontological moments and epistemological TFs in social science, a relationship absent from CR. Specifically, they provoke the question of how epistemic TFs assume causal power, both in terms of what that power consists of and how it is actualized through intentional action.

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For the reasons stated or implied above, the central topic of this book is dialectic itself. In the author’s perspective, i.e., transitively, dialectic is seen as the highest cognitive achievement of human adults as agents exerting causal powers on account of their needs and reasons.

Expressed on all four levels of social being (enduring social structures, person, interpersonal relationships, human agency), **dialectic appears in this book in three different, intrinsically related forms:**

1. The *ontological* dialectic of Moments of the real (being) issuing in generative mechanisms as distinct from actualities and experiences (Bhaskar 1979).
2. The *epistemic* dialectic of human thought forms (TFs) operating within individuals' internal workplace (in contrast to their external workplace), -- the mental space in which 'work' is done and 'agency' is launched (Laske 2008).
3. The dialectic of generative mechanisms by which human thought forms (TFs) assume and exert causal power as determinants of *needs* and *reasons* based on which agents are in unceasing interaction with each other and thus the real world, natural and social (Laske 2021).

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The loadstar of this book is Roy Bhaskar's explanatory (immanent) critique of positivistic and hermeneutic approaches to social reality, often referred to by him simply as 'irrealism'.

As Bhaskar proposes and is now largely accepted opinion, there exists no absolute interpretation of '*social reality*'. The latter is interpretable à la Durckheim, Weber, Marx, Adorno, Liebrucks, Habermas, Gadamer, etc. This interpretative feature of social reality and society can be rendered by the dialectical image of a snake biting its own tail: something comes to be both the input to, as well as the output from, a developmental process.

Whatever the deficiencies of Bhaskar's bold redefinition of adult cognitive development and social reality, his cogent ontological choices, made to avoid the philosophical misstep of committing the epistemic fallacy (reduction of reality to thought) open new vistas for understanding social reality.

The author would name three main deficiencies of dialectical critical realism (DCR) in its present, strictly Bhaskarian, form:

1. Neglect of adult-developmental findings, research, thinking practice.
2. Overfocus on experimental natural science practices in physics and chemistry to the exclusion of practices of biology and the life sciences.
3. Underestimation of the (epistemic) thought form structure of social practices (in the sense of Laske's *Dialectical Thought Form Framework*) as well as these practices' potential for becoming carriers of reason- and need-based intentional agency.

The first deficiency accounts for CR's impoverished static definition of human agency; the second eliminates the interaction of biological organisms as a model of language-based dialogue (also implying an insubstantial definition of human language itself); the third leads to an impoverishment of the definition of human agency as reproducer and transformer of self and society by way of a diversity of social manifestations of "work".

It Is the author's intention to remedy these deficiencies as much as is possible, thereby to show the benefits of a combined ontological and epistemic dialectic for an emancipatory – rather than ideological-- social science.

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2021