

WHEN UNVEILING THE EPISTEMIC FALLACY ENDS WITH COMMITTING THE ONTOLOGICAL FALLACY. ON THE CONTRIBUTION OF CRITICAL REALISM TO THE SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC EXPLANATORY PRACTICE

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1. Introduction

In the debate on the best methodology for the social sciences the contributions have for a very long time been divided into two camps: the individualist and the collectivist (or holist) camp. Thanks to Critical Realism and Anthony Giddens, amongst others, a third (methodological) option was developed in which the interplay between individuals and social structures was emphasized.²

In this article, we want to analyse what Critical Realists, after developing this third way, have to tell us about the explanatory practice

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² The relation between Critical Realists and Anthony Giddens is not entirely clear. Some Critical Realists, e.g. Margaret Archer (1995), do openly criticize Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration and consider their own approach as clearly distinct. Others emphasize the similarities, e.g. Bhaskar (1993) and Stones (2001). Anthony King describes the relation between Giddens and two important Critical Realists (Bhaskar and Archer), as follows (1999:199-200): "Archer herself has explicitly argued for the very close connection between her own morphogenetic approach and Bhaskar's critical realism (Archer 1995:135-41, 157); and Bhaskar in turn, has argued that his TMSA [Transformational Model of Social Activity] is compatible with Giddens' structuration theory (Bhaskar, 1993:154). Thus, if we accept Bhaskar's interpretation of Giddens, the positions of three major British social theorists can be shown to have a broad 'family resemblance'."

of social scientists. In order to do this, we will first recall the reorientation of the relation between ontology and epistemology as suggested by Critical Realism as a critique against earlier (positivist) interpretations of this relation (Section 2). In Section 3 we will question the Critical Realist's reorientation in a very general way. In the following sections, we will focus more specifically on Critical Realist's ideas concerning social scientific explanation. In section 4, we will focus on Tony Lawson's work that can be considered as a good representation of Critical Realist's ideas in social science, and discuss the impact of the reorientation of the relation between ontology and epistemology on the explanatory practice and the lacunae of his contribution on this topic. Section 5 will point out that the work of other Critical Realists shows similar lacunae. Section 6 suggests an alternative reorientation and its consequences for the explanatory practice.

We will conclude that in the methodological discussion between individualists and collectivists the way out is not a third way that, again, prescribes an ideal form of explanation starting from a strong ontological conviction (as was done by methodological individualists and collectivists), but rather to use maximally the different forms of explanation available without neglecting ontological consistency. This will lead to a defence of explanatory pluralism.

2. The Epistemic Fallacy

A central issue in the contributions of Critical Realism to the philosophy of social science is the unveiling of the *epistemic fallacy*, being the fallacy that transposes what is an ontological matter into an epistemological matter, a failure to sustain adequately the distinction between ontology and epistemology, resulting in the relative neglect of ontology (cf. Bhaskar, 1975).

Tony Lawson, who analyses possible contributions of the Critical Realist's perspective to economics, draws the following conclusion from the unveiling of the epistemic fallacy:

It is opportune to develop a perspective on the way that social reality is, rather than merely to assume under the sway of the *epistemic fallacy* that it must conform to the sort of *a priori*, typically

formalistic, methods of which economists are currently, if largely unthinkingly, enamoured. (1997:154)

Critical Realists, thus, defend that the one-sided attention for epistemology and neglect of ontology, has to be replaced by a focus on ontology. Steve Fleetwood puts it as follows:

Clearly any such awareness [that the basic (deductivist) method of mainstream economics is inappropriate to its subject matter] presupposes *a priori analysis* of the nature of social phenomena – as does any project of developing an alternative. Hence, for the critical realist project, socio-economic ontology figures centrally. (1999b:129, my italics)

Central in the focus on socio-economic ontology, then, figures the transcendental argument for social structures. This argument was developed by Roy Bhaskar in the context of his discussion of the debate between individualism and collectivism (or holism). He formulated it as follows:

(...) conscious human activity, consists in work on *given* objects and cannot be conceived as occurring in their absence. A moment's reflection shows why this must be so. For all activity presupposes the prior existence of social forms. Thus consider *saying*, *making* and *doing* as characteristic modalities of human agency. People cannot communicate except by utilizing existing media, produce except by applying themselves to materials which are already formed, or act save in some other context. Speech requires language; making materials; actions conditions; agency resources; activity rules. Even spontaneity has as its necessary condition the pre-existence of a social form with (or by means of) which the spontaneous act is performed. Thus if [as previously argued] the social cannot be reduced to (and is not the product of) the individual, it is equally clear that society is a necessary condition for any intentional human act at all. (1979:34)

Tony Lawson (1997:30-31) provides a similar, and more detailed, argument, but for now Bhaskar's quote will suffice to illustrate the reorientation of the relation between ontology and epistemology as suggested by Critical Realism. The epistemic fallacy should be avoided by focussing on ontology, i.e. a prior analysis of the nature of social

phenomena, which leads in the Critical Realist's case to subscribing to the existence and irreducibility of social structure (following the transcendental argument). However, is this the (only) way to avoid the epistemic fallacy?

3. The Ontological Fallacy?

In this section, we want to analyse in very general terms to what extent the Critical Realist's reorientation (sketched in section 2) considers actual social scientific practice. In the following sections, we will more specifically deal with Critical Realist's ideas on explanation and its relation with social scientific practice.

After a meticulous analysis of the transcendental argument as formulated by Bhaskar and Lawson, Francesco Guala (unpublished:9) sums up:

(...) the transcendental argument for social structures does not provide a 'proof' of the existence of structures in the social realm analogous to the argument from experiments in the natural sciences. The argument from experiments moves from a widely accepted and successful practice (or method of investigation); the argument for social structures moves from a (folk) social theory. The critical realist approach, moreover, misleadingly suggests that our confidence in the existence of social structures is based on a transcendental derivation from the category of 'choice', rather than on a careful mix of observation and induction (as all good science should be).

Guala does not stand alone in criticizing the transcendental argument (cf. Parsons, 1999; Boylan and O'Gorman, 1995). We do not want to go into the details of the argument (although we do share the scepticism of Guala), but want to draw attention to the way an ontological stance has been adopted here by the Critical Realists (and with it a restriction of methodological options). It does remind us of older ways of reasoning in the philosophy of social sciences.

The example *par excellence* to illustrate the way of reasoning we want to point at is John Watkins. In his (1973:179) Watkins starts from the 'metaphysical commonplace', that "social events are brought about by *people*". From this *ontological* 'commonplace', Watkins derives the

methodological implication that "large-scale phenomena (...) should be explained in terms of situations, dispositions, and beliefs of *individuals*". (1973:179) Although it could be defended that the ontological stance of the Critical Realist is a lot more sophisticated, we do notice a similar way of reasoning about the relation between social ontology on the one hand and epistemology and methodology on the other hand. It starts with certain *a priori* or necessary truths concerning social ontology, be it justified by 'metaphysical commonplaces', (questionable) transcendental arguments or political convictions, and, then, the methodological consequences (the Critical Realist's consequences do, of course, differ enormously from Watkins's) seem to follow 'automatically' from the ontological stance (cf. *infra*). I will refer to this move as the 'Watkins'-way of reasoning.

What happens, according to us, is that preconceived ideas on ontology are imposed too hasty, while it is the job of the social scientist to investigate the 'nature' of social reality. Why does a priori analysis have to inform us on the nature of social phenomena? How does this take into account the actual social scientific practice and its ontological views? We do think that Critical Realists fulfil a job that should be left to the scientists, or in which the scientist's contributions should (at least) be taken more into consideration. It is too premature to develop (a philosophy of) social science on a preconceived idea about social structures.

We do not want to argue that social structures (or other ontological assumptions of the Critical Realist's stance) do not exist, but that the way these assumptions have been defended by Critical Realism is problematic. The attempt to justify the claim that the world has indeed the form argued for in transcendental realism does not convince. Moreover, as the ontological choice made by Critical Realism does have an impact on methodological options, we want to warn for an *ontological fallacy*: taking an a priori ontological stance which transposes or reduces epistemological and methodological matters into an ontological matter. Analogous to the *epistemic fallacy* it points at a failure to sustain adequately the distinction between ontology and epistemology.³

³ The idea of an *ontological fallacy* in relation with Critical Realism has been used before by Wade Hands (1999:181).

In criticising Bhaskar's and Lawson's transcendental argument we do not want to suggest that no attention should be paid to the ontological 'depth', or that their ontological convictions would be necessarily wrong, or that all ontological problems should be reduced to epistemological problems. We would rather want to point at the seemingly unproblematic character of the ontological point of view imposed by Critical Realists and its seemingly neutral stance towards epistemology. Lawson speaks of epistemological relativism (Lawson, 1997:58-59), with which he correctly points to the historical and social relativity of knowledge. But he seems, as well, to suggest that the ontological framework as defended in the transcendental argument leaves maximal choice (nothing has been decided) among epistemological options, call it pluralism, as long as the 'nature of reality' is respected. A nature on which Lawson decides a priori:

a realist orientation of the sort I am intending to defend insists that methods of social science can, and indeed should, be designed to take account of available insights concerning the nature of social material. (1997:16)

Does Lawson rely on the available insights? Doesn't he just start from a preconceived idea on the nature of reality, as Guala (cf. supra) points out? Moreover, these preconceived ideas are not epistemologically or methodologically neutral: the existence of emergent social structures (cfr. Lawson, 1997:63ff) and the adoption of the *Transformational Model of Social Activity* (TMSA) (cfr. Lawson 1997:168-169) do have an impact on the (ideal) explanatory practice (cf. infra).

Concluding this section, we want to insist on the importance of the ontological starting points of the social scientists themselves, and of the actual state of social science on ontological matters (as a counterweight to the a priori analysis and the *ontological fallacy*). Secondly, it has to be acknowledged that imposing an *a priori* ontology is not epistemologically neutral, and does affect the methodological options available. Therefore, the old 'Watkins'-way of reasoning should be questioned.

4. Mechanisms and Explanations

After this general argument against the Critical Realist's ontological stance, we want to show how it affects more specifically Tony Lawson's position on social scientific explanations (in this section) and that of other Critical Realists (in section 5). In this way, we will show the impact of the reorientation of the relation between ontology and epistemology on the explanatory practice, and the lacunae in Critical Realist's contributions. This will lead to the question of how to avoid both the epistemic and the ontological fallacy, and how to elaborate an alternative reorientation.

In his account of explanations in social science, Lawson puts emphasis on his rejection of the positivist Covering Law model that he wants to replace by the identification of mechanisms, structures, capacities, etc.

I do argue that the primary aim of science and explanation is to identify and understand the underlying structures, capacities, mechanisms, etc. which causally bear upon (facilitate, influence, produce) surface phenomena, including events, of interest. (1999:233)

In having the identification of mechanisms, structures, capacities, etc. as a primary focus, Lawson seems to adopt a bad habit of the Covering Law model, namely to focus (in the applications of the model) on the confirmation of the law (respectively the mechanisms), and not on the development of an adequate explanation of a particular social fact. What Lawson ignores is the importance of pragmatic factors in providing social scientific explanations (as focussing on ontology seems to promise the solution of all problems related to explanatory practice), and the way pragmatic factors affect the choice of the form of explanation.

In earlier publications we have developed a framework for understanding explanatory pluralism in the social sciences in which the importance of explanatory requests (or explanation-seeking why-questions) and their underlying motivations are taken into account, and we have shown how different questions about one social fact can lead to different forms of explanations. (Weber and Van Bouwel (2002) and Van Bouwel and Weber (2002a)). In developing this framework, we used the erotetic model of explanation that regards explanations as answers to why-questions. We distinguished at least four types of explanatory

questions:

(*plain fact*) Why does object *a* have property P?

(*P-contrast*) Why does object *a* have property P, rather than property P'?'⁴

(*O-contrast*) Why does object *a* have property P, while object *b* has property P'?

(*T-contrast*) Why does object *a* have property P at time *t*, but property P' at time *t'*?

Explanations of *plain facts* (answers to non-contrastive questions) show in detail how the observed fact was actually caused, which implies providing the detailed mediating mechanisms in a non-interrupted causal chain across time. An explainer might specify a sequence of events in history, a causal chain, ending with the explanandum. The underlying motivation of explanations of plain facts could either be straightforward curiosity (the desire to know how the fact "fits into the causal structure of the world", to know how the fact was produced from given antecedents via spatio-temporally continuous processes) or the desire to have information which enables us to predict whether and in which circumstances similar facts will occur in the future.

A *contrastive* explanation (an answer to a contrastive question) on the contrary will provide information about the features that differentiate the actual causal history from its (un)actualized alternative; this information does not include information that would also have applied to the causal histories of alternative facts.⁵ These explanations of contrasts can have a therapeutic function, or are motivated by 'unexpectedness'. They isolate causes that help us to reach the ideal (P-contrast) or to remove the observed difference (T- and O-contrast). Alternatively, they could be meant to tell us why things have been otherwise than we expected them to be. We do not consider the motivations mentioned here as the only

⁴ P and P' are supposed to be mutually exclusive.

⁵ Against scholars that are convinced that every explanation of a fact is an explanation of an -explicit or implicit- contrast (e.g. van Fraassen 1980:130, Ylikoski 2001:31; *contra* Humphreys 1989:137), we defend that explanations of facts are to be distinguished from explanations of contrasts both in structure and in motivation.

possible ones, but we do believe they are omnipresent in the social science practice.

By making the different possible explanatory requests explicit (cf. O-, P-, T- contrasts or a plain fact) the motivation, the context and the explanatory information required will be taken into account. It can be shown that one social fact can be the subject of different questions, and hence of different explanations. Therefore, identifying mechanisms does not suffice; the questions (and the context leading to those questions) asked about the social fact have to be considered, because different questions can ask for the identification of different mechanisms. Moreover, taking into account the explanatory question is not something of secondary importance, as it decides on which form of explanation will be used (cf. Weber and Van Bouwel, 2002).

Boylan and O’Gorman (1999:144) do point at the importance of pragmatic factors as well:

In short, no one explanation has precedence over another; there is no such thing as *the* explanation. This, in our opinion, is the tacit presupposition of transcendental realism and, as we have just indicated, this presupposition does not stand up to critical scrutiny. We must take seriously the context-ladenness of scientific explanation.

Lawson’s view on explanation (cf. supra “I do argue that the primary aim of science and explanation is to identify and understand the underlying structures, capacities, mechanisms, etc.”) is one-dimensional and (at least) underdeveloped. We do not want to question the importance of identifying mechanisms, but it is important to stress that different explanatory requests, different motivations for providing explanations of a social phenomenon or fact, ask for different forms and applications of the mechanism-idea (as good explanatory information should be the goal, rather than merely the confirmation of identified mechanisms).

Neglecting the pragmatics of explanation, Lawson seems to have an idea of *the* explanation, a *complete* explanation that ‘covers’ the whole ‘reality’ (whose nature was *a priori* decided upon) preceding the social phenomenon or fact to be explained. We will return to this idea of a complete explanation, but conclude for now that the knowledge-interest relevance of explanations is underestimated by Lawson; a fact(or) has explanatory relevance if it has both causal relevance (an ontological

component) and pragmatic relevance (an epistemic component). If Critical Realism wants to explain the economic reality and the (economic) reality of explaining it will have to take the pragmatics of explanations into account (and avoid adopting bad habits from the Covering Law model).

5. Critical Realism in the Social Sciences

Both the ontological fallacy (as described in section 3) and the neglect of pragmatics and knowledge-interest relevance of explanations (because of a one-sided interest in mechanisms, cf. section 4) are not only present in Tony Lawson's contributions, but in many other interventions using the Critical Realist's contributions in social scientific debates as well.

In analysing the Critical Realist's contributions of e.g. Margaret Archer (1995) in social theory and sociology, David Dessler (1989) and Walter Carlsnaes (1992) in international relations theory, Christopher Lloyd (1993) in history, etc. two common features are obvious:

(a) The agent/structure debate, and debates between individualists and collectivists, can be solved by spelling out (a priori) the ontological relation.

Debates between individualists and collectivists are dealt with in a very general way, replacing the conflationary individualism and collectivism in the respective social scientific disciplines by a version of the *Transformative Model of Social Activity*. Secondly, the idea of emergent properties is assumed.

Striking is that the contributions in the different social sciences are interchangeable, which shows that the actual practice and ontological presuppositions of the specific discipline are not seriously taken into account. Rather than a priori defining how the social world functions, it could be more fruitful to start from empirical research.⁶

⁶ The actual state of the social sciences deserves more attention, cf. «The proponents of CR oscillate between a descriptive and a prescriptive philosophy of science, and whilst they recently purport to accomplish the latter, I argue that their strength lies in the former.» (Baert, 1996:514).

(b) The methodological consequences of Critical Realist's ontology follow 'automatically', and hence do not have to be spelled out; the pragmatics of explanation are neglected completely.

A second common feature is the lack of attention paid to the form of explanations and to methodology in general. Margaret Archer, for instance, couples her ontological realism with a methodological realism, but does not develop this last component extensively. One of the very few occasions on which she mentions the *methodological* component, is in the following quote:

Just as Individualism and Holism represented social ontologies whose commitments to what constitutes the social world then issued in programmatic injunctions about how it should be studied and explained (that is Methodological Individualism and Methodological Holism as conflationary programmes working in opposite directions), so the realist social ontology also enjoins a Methodological Realism which embodies its commitments to depth, stratification and emergence as definitional of social reality. Thus the burden of this chapter has been to demonstrate that given these fundamental tenets of realism, they can only be respected and reflected by a Methodological Realism which approaches structure and agency through 'analytical dualism' – in order to be able to explore the linkages between these separate strata with their own autonomous, irreducible, emergent properties and which consequently repudiates any form of conflation (be it upwards, downwards or central) in social theorizing. (1995:159)

This quote shows how Archer adopts the 'Watkins'-way of reasoning on the relation between ontology and methodology: first, we decide (a priori) on a social ontology, and, secondly, we spell out (and sometimes that does not even seem to be necessary) the methodological implications. However, is prescribing a methodology (based on an a priori ontology) and its ideal form of explanation the way to deal with the plurality of successful forms of explanation in the social sciences? It is obvious that Archer's methodology does not do much more than repeating the (a priori) ontological stance; nothing about pluralism of explanations or about pragmatic factors, nothing about the actual state of disciplines in which explanations are competing.

In the contributions of Christopher Lloyd and David Dessler, as well, the exact form of explanation that has to be linked to their ontological

elaborations remains vague and underdeveloped; attention goes mainly to the ontological innovations. Both Lloyd and Dessler seem to cherish an idea of a *complete* explanation, in which an account of both agency and structure (understood in the interplay) is given.⁷

Dessler (1989:453) states the following:

In Aristotelian terms, structure is a material cause rather than an efficient cause of behavior. Structure alone explains only the possibilities (and impossibilities) of action. (...) A complete explanation must appeal not only to the material but also the efficient causes of action, which can be located only within a theory of the agents.⁸

If we analyse the contributions of Christopher Lloyd (1989, 1993) who applies the ideas of Critical Realism to history-writing, we discover that the thrust of his argument is to try to unify explanation around a common basic approach, where no difference exists between an individual and a collectivist approach as all explanations should be *structurist* (a 'combination' of the structural and the individual understood in a structurist way), in which *structurism* points at his version of the TMSA (Lloyd, 1989:456). Defending this kind of methodology, in which the dialectical relation between agency and structure is reflected in structurist explanations, leads in Lloyd's case to defending *complete* explanations (Lloyd, 1989:482). *Completeness*, in Lloyd's view, depends on an 'objective' world that could be truthfully and completely described. We claim that it is Lloyd's view on causation and ontology that imposes this (too demanding) view on explanations; causation should not be confused

⁷ Another example is Alexander Wendt (1987:362), in an article very much in the Critical Realist tradition: "they [structural and agent-based analyses] are both necessary elements of a complete explanation of social action."

⁸ Dessler however suggests (in a footnote, *nota bene*) that: "Not every specific explanation, of course, need give a complete analysis of both agential powers and the conditions in which those powers are deployed. But the explanations must make room for such completion; or more accurately, the conceptual scheme or framework underpinning specific explanations must recognize and make appropriate allowance for the workings of both agency and structure, even if each specific explanation does not exploit this allowance." (Dessler, 1989:443-444n) Dessler does however not spell out when a complete explanation is needed, and when an 'incomplete' explanation suffices, and what the content of that last one should be anyway.

with explanation.

Completeness of explanations, in our view, depends on the epistemic needs of the researcher, the questions involved. Formulating explanations is combining the causally relevant (the ontological component) with what is pragmatically relevant (which parts of the causal history have to be mentioned), and as such always connected to knowledge-interests. An explanation will always be a selection of a ideal, complete causal account. So, if Critical Realists would reply that the explanations taken on their own (individual or structural) are incomplete or insufficient to provide a full picture of social phenomena, we can only answer that any explanation is incomplete given the standards of the Critical Realists. (Secondly, we should warn for another bad inheritance of the Covering Law model, i.c. the ideal form of explanation.)

Just like Lawson's view on explanations, this idea of a complete explanation has the same a-temporal, non-situated quest for truth, and lacks consideration of knowledge-interest and motivations underlying an explanation. Attention to pragmatics would point out how explanations on different levels (individual or social level) can provide different explanatory information, and can be understood as complete in the sense that they can satisfactorily answer the explanatory request (cf. Weber and Van Bouwel, 2002).

We can conclude that the impact of the reorientation of the relation between ontology and epistemology on the explanatory practice has (up to now) stranded in vague ideas of a (ideal) complete explanation. As the focus has been on ontological issues most of the time, the methodological consequences are underdeveloped, and the ideal form of (complete) explanation as present in Critical Realist's contribution is at odds with the plurality we find in the explanatory practice of social scientists.

6. Explanation and Causation

Getting rid of the a priori ontological stance of Critical Realism (by e.g. the rejection of the transcendental argument) does not necessarily mean that metaphysical absurdities (cf. Lawson, 1999:213) are generated. We want to suggest an alternative reorientation that avoids the epistemic fallacy without committing the ontological fallacy. Avoiding the first implies avoiding imposing a general (ideal) form of explanation on the

social sciences (as was done with the Covering Law model) and to take into account the pluralism of the scientific explanatory practice and the underlying ontological debates. The ontological fallacy could be avoided by leaving the 'Watkins'-way of reasoning and changing the a priori analysis for an (active) interest in the ontological presuppositions and findings of social scientists themselves.

In the alternative reorientation of the relation between ontology and methodology in social science we want to put the explanatory pluralism (and the framework to understand this pluralism, cf. *supra*) central; we want to allow a maximum of different forms of explanation (on different levels) as long as it does not lead to ontological inconsistencies. In order to avoid these inconsistencies and an *anything goes* approach, we do want to consider ontological issues (the way the world works) as well, but not in an a priori way as it is done by Critical Realists. The position of ontology should not be understood as imposing an ontological framework onto social sciences from which a unifying method is deduced, but rather a conception of causation in the background that gives maximal space to different forms of explanation. Differently from Critical Realism this social ontology has to be considered as *a posteriori*.

As we have argued in Van Bouwel and Weber (2002b) a good ontological framework for this idea of explanatory pluralism is the causal fundamentalism as elaborated by Philip Pettit (1993). We do not want to defend Pettit's version of non-reductive physicalism as the only option in social ontology, neither defend it on the basis of its strength (or position) in the metaphysical debate, but rather because it fits with the explanatory practice of the social sciences (for now). Possible alternative conceptions should be considered in the perspective of the social scientific practice.

Although we cannot deny the impact of ontological issues, we are convinced that our views on explanatory options in the social sciences have been too long dictated by our views on ontology and causation. Many contemporary contributions in the philosophy of social science focus mainly on how the relation between agency and structure has to be understood ontologically. Once that has been understood the whole methodological debate seems to be solved. But while causation and explanation are not clearly distinguished in ordinary or non-philosophical thought, it is important to be aware of the distinction in philosophy, and to explore the different explanatory options that get along with a conception of causality. Too much weight has been put on the ontological

debate, which has led to the neglect of the debate on methodology and explanations. In *philosophy of mind* there are some people putting a similar emphasis, i.e. do not get paralysed by metaphysical or ontological debates, but rather pay attention to explanatory practice. E.g. Tyler Burge states the following about the worries that exist in *philosophy of mind* on mental causation:

But what interests me more is the very existence of the worries. I think that they are symptomatic of a mistaken set of philosophical priorities. Materialist metaphysics has been given more weight than it deserves. Reflection on explanatory practice has been given too little. (1993:97)

A similar idea is defended by Lynne Rudder Baker:

Given standard metaphysical and methodological assumptions, not only has the problem of mental causation proved to be intractable but even worse: the same reasoning that leads to scepticism about mental causation also leads to scepticism about almost all supposed 'upper-level' causation, and hence to scepticism about explanations that mention 'upper-level' properties, including explanations offered by the special sciences and much of physics. Of course, pointing out such skeptical conclusions, even of this magnitude, is not a refutation of the metaphysical assumptions that generate them. But skeptical consequences may well be a motivation for taking a different philosophical tack. (...) My proposal is to perform a methodological about-face. Instead of beginning with a full-blown metaphysical picture, we should begin with a range of good explanations, scientific and commonsensical. (...) Although my proposal has a strong pragmatic cast, it is by no means an anti-realist suggestion. I am not equating what is real with what is needed for explanations and predictions. The point is, rather, that we have no better access to reality than what is required for cognitive success, construed broadly enough to include what is cognitively required for achieving goals in both science and everyday life. (1993:94-95)

This change of focus will make us give up or loosen the seemingly inevitable connection between ontology and methodology as present in the 'Watkins'-way of reasoning, and will broaden possible connections between ontology and methodology, and make us explore the option of explanatory pluralism.

7. Conclusion

Although Critical Realists have legitimately criticized positivist explanatory prescriptions, their critique of the epistemic fallacy has led to committing the ontological fallacy. We do not want to argue that ontology has to be neglected, but its position should be reconsidered. Social ontology cannot be *a priori* designed by philosophers and imposed on social scientists. It is part of the job of social scientists to inform us on ontological issues as well, and secondly philosophers should take the ontological presuppositions of the social scientists into account. Empirical investigation will lead us away from metaphysical debates that seem to be conclusive for the design of a social ontology, and will make us consider social ontology as *a posteriori* changeable.

After analysing the contributions of Critical Realists on issues of explanation in the social sciences, we have to conclude that there are lacunae here (a consequence of their ontological fixation). We suggest that pragmatics of explanations have to be considered in order to understand the pluralism of the explanatory practice. This explanatory practice should be understood as an action to obtain knowledge about the world, a situated knowledge (starting from the knowledge-interests, rather than an a-temporal, not-situated quest for truth). Here as well, Critical Realists should direct themselves to empirical research, to competing explanations of particular facts. Rather than imposing their *prefabricated* ontology and the ideal complete explanation that comes with it, some *piecemeal engineering* (given the debates on explanations between social scientists) seems recommendable.

The methodological discussion between individualists and collectivists we have referred to in the beginning of this article, should therefore not be solved by a 'third' way. In stead of developing this 'third' way that prescribes an ideal form of explanation starting from a strong ontological conviction (as was done by methodological individualists and collectivists), we have to use maximally the different forms of explanation available in the social sciences without neglecting ontological consistency. This will lead to exploring the opportunities and limits of explanatory pluralism.

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