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Did Ludwig Wittgenstein *really* understand Roy Bhaskar?

Problems pose dilemmas. ... dilemmas have presuppositions.— Roy Bhaskar (1994, 9)

WITTGENSTEIN AND THE IDEA OF A CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY: a critique of Giddens, Habermas and Bhaskar by Nigel Pleasants. Routledge Studies in Social and Political Thought. London, 1999. ix, 211 pp.

In *Wittgenstein and the Idea of a Critical Social Theory* Nigel Pleasants (1999) stages a confrontation between Wittgenstein's idea of philosophy and the differing conceptions of critical social theory produced by Habermas, Giddens and Bhaskar. In so doing, he has provided an opportunity to examine aspects of the relationship between interpretation and metaphysics. Distinctive philosophical practices are not necessarily equal, rather they can be asymmetrical in the sense that whilst one can understand the other, the same is not true in reverse. This question is prompted by the absence in Pleasants' work of any recognition of the severe difficulties he encounters in translating Bhaskar's thought into terms that make it susceptible to Wittgensteinian critique. These interpretative problems, and their invisibility, are direct consequences of characteristics of Wittgenstein's thought and his conception of the nature of philosophy. Wittgenstein, embracing analytical logic, repudiates reconstructive metaphysics, understood here as categorial change, and in so doing blocks off the possibility of understanding Bhaskar's development of dialectical categories necessary to sustain conceptions of both ontological and epistemological change. Bhaskar's philosophical practice, in contrast, makes possible a fresh and clearer conception of Wittgenstein's.

This case will be made in the following steps: the problematic character of Pleasants' interpretation of Bhaskar will be brought out; the focus will then shift to the way in which the interpretative exercise has been framed and some associated problems; the connections between these problems and the differing conceptions of philosophy will then be examined.

Mistranslation

Wittgenstein should be seen as a thought experiment, an anachronistic 'what if?': if Wittgenstein could have examined contemporary social theory, what would he have said? Framing the book in this way brackets out all of the really *historical* questions concerning the relations between Wittgenstein's thought and the work that has come after him. Nevertheless, suspending queries arising from the obvious anachronisms allows the reader to enter into this imaginative construction of a fusion of conceptual horizons (see Gadamer, 1993). Yet, if there is a fundamental flaw with this, it is in the underestimation of the hermeneutic problems entailed in trying to make sense of problematic meanings. Pleasants does indeed run into serious interpretative problems. An examination of Pleasants' treatment of Bhaskar reveals a persistent tendency towards mistranslation, with repeated violence being done to

meaning. This occurs because the way Pleasants makes sense of Bhaskar is by systematically imposing his own categories onto Bhaskar's thought. Absent from his work is the recognition of a distinctive categorial system.

Some kind of change in meaning is usually entailed by the resolution of problematic meanings. However, the kinds of change which can occur can be differentiated. The most commonly recognised form of change is that conceptual novelty which occurs within existing horizons. Gadamer's conception of a fusion of conceptual horizons arguably captures this sense of change most strongly. Fusing horizons entails a change in the horizons of the interpreter as they encompass the alien language within their own as the interpreter finds ways of lending meaning to an unfamiliar idiom. The term 'fusion' is merited by the changes to the substantive possibilities realised within existing horizons. It is worth noting that Pleasants' account of Bhaskar does not go even this far, for Bhaskar is treated as one who plays with words, not meanings.

Wittgensteinian legislation

A different conception of conceptual change is exemplified by Louis Althusser (1970). His account of Marx's 'epistemological break' does include an account of a range of novel substantive concepts, but these are not simply different from those of classical political economy. Marx's concepts embody a 'structural', or categorial, transformation. The critique of political economy highlighted a range of categorial errors embodied in its conceptions, errors such as reductive and expressive conceptions of causality. Marx's innovation was to develop a substantively novel conception of capital which also embodied a new categorial structure. So when Althusser speaks of the 'conceptual object' of *Capital*, he is referring to these two dimensions of Marx's conception, the form and the content. This second aspect of meaning change is not only missing from Pleasants' work, it is excluded.

One fault line along which intellectual endeavours of modernity have been divided is that which distinguishes legislators from interpreters (Bauman, 1987). Pleasants is keen to place Wittgenstein on the side of the interpreters. However, his interpretative failure indicates a significant limitation on the Wittgensteinian project of deconstructing legislative philosophical work to make space for greater interpretative flexibility. This is because the working conception of interpretation being deployed itself enforces a legislative embargo on understanding meanings that embody certain categories. This conception of interpretation is consistent with a conception of philosophy that

excludes some forms of explicit categorial investigation.

Metaphysics outlawed

The problems of philosophy, as they are identified by Wittgenstein, arise from attempts to legislate for meaning, or from conceptions of language that hold that it embodies a legislative function in ‘philosophical pictures’, or ‘ontological pictures’, which do their work by predefining rules by which some phenomenon should be thought about. To expose the legislative character of contemporary philosophy, Pleasants reconstructs what he calls a Wittgensteinian ‘attitude’: a ‘dispositional or presuppositional orientation’ that constitutes a ‘framework within which interpretation takes place’ (3). This framework can be seen in terms of the defensive and offensive strategies deployed by Wittgenstein. The defensive strand is very much the minor one, in that it receives little more than cursory attention. It could be argued, however, that it is the structurally dominant strand as the logic of the work hinges on its success. This defensive operation is meant to protect a specific conception of the limits of philosophy, which can be captured in the affirmation that ‘ontologising is out’: metaphysics is held to be a non-rational pursuit. Having set himself against constructive metaphysics, Wittgenstein adopted a conception of his own philosophical practice as partially descriptive and, more significantly, as deconstructive. What emerges most strongly, through this offensive approach, is the contention that the non-rational pursuit of metaphysics generates substantively irrational consequences. The technique Wittgenstein adopted to reveal these effects was ‘immanent critique’: revealing internal inconsistencies between means and ends. Pleasants argues that thinkers are susceptible to such critique to the extent that they fail to satisfy their own stated requirements for what counts as a solution to their stated problem.

The application of this method, and its limits, are best illustrated through Pleasants’ account of Bhaskar, as it is here that the strengths and weaknesses are most apparent. There are three aspects to his account. He aims to (1) ‘highlight some of the paradoxical consequences that follow from Bhaskar’s attempt to resolve the conflict [between ‘free will’ and ‘determinism’, and concomitantly, ‘compatibilism’ and ‘incompatibilism’] through the ontological machinations of his transcendental realism’; then (2) to ‘show that Bhaskar’s theorisation of agency is incoherent and inherently contradictory – judged by *his own* criteria for justifiable knowledge claims’; and (3) to challenge ‘the validity of the contention that “there is an elective affinity between critical realism and historical materialism”’ (101).¹ All three arguments are of some interest, and analysis of each reveals the same kind of interpretative damage being done. In this context, however, the details of just one will suffice.²

Emergence epistemologized

Pleasants’ handles each of these issues in the same way. He tries to identify some paradox or contradiction, then seeks to show this arises because of some metaphysical misconception. In his second case Pleasants tackles Bhaskar’s account of the traditional problems in conceiving of human agency.

One aspect of this problem is exemplified by Rorty’s work: the conception of freedom (to experience and describe the world) is grounded in ignorance (of a predetermined, closed universe, subject to mechanical, immutable law-governed sequences of cause and effect). Pleasants recognises that Bhaskar’s stated objective is to ground his concept of agency in reality, but declares that he achieves no more than a restatement Rorty’s position in a different language. This is said to be due to Bhaskar’s use of the terms ‘emergence’ and ‘irreducibility’ to describe the relation between thought and biology, which appears to Pleasants as simply another way of expressing the absence of knowledge of the relation, hence grounding it in ignorance once more.

This understanding of the term ‘emergence’ as a reference to a purely epistemic condition is taken directly from Thomas Nagel (1979), who is quoted in full:

... emergence is an epistemological condition: it means that an observed feature of the system cannot be derived from the properties currently attributed to its constituents. But this is reason to conclude that either the system has further constituents of which we are not yet aware, or the constituents of which we are aware have further properties that we have not yet discovered (112).

Pleasants does not investigate Bhaskar’s use of this term in any other way, and so, without any real argument at all, Bhaskar’s ‘ontologisation’ of ‘emergence’ has been flatly dismissed.³

Ontological extensionalism

This is a quite remarkable way of treating Bhaskar’s work. It has been a consistent feature of his philosophical project, from a *Realist Theory of Science* to *Dialectic and Plato Etc.*, to develop the ontological categories needed to make it possible to speak and think about things in ways that encompass all of their features. His use of ‘emergence’ is quite consistent with this. Some of the sense with which this term is used can be clarified by examining Pleasants’ reasons for regarding Bhaskar as having failed to overcome dualism. Pleasants holds that this failure can be seen in terms of Bhaskar’s having changed words, but not meanings: he finds that ‘ontological dualism’ has been variously replaced with the terms ‘ontological duality’, ‘ontological distinction’ and ‘ontological hiatus’. The meanings of these terms can be legitimately conflated, he argues, because Bhaskar uses them to refer to the differences between radically distinct kinds of things, e.g. persons and society. It is said to follow from this usage that, in his discussions of the relations between persons and society, Bhaskar argues for two mutually exclusive positions: (i) society *is* dependent on individuals (which Bhaskar explicitly holds); (ii) society is *not* dependent on individuals (which Pleasants says is logically implied). Pleasants’ reasons for believing that Bhaskar holds the latter position rest entirely on the working assumption of the principle of ontological extensionalism: the conviction that the only possible relations between entities and/or kinds of entities are external (113). In the case of persons and society it would mean that, as they are different kinds of thing, the only possible relation between them is one of separation, hence the independence of the social from persons.

However, if one accepts Bhaskar's own arguments that distinct kinds of entities can be internally related, then all of the apparent problems vanish.⁴ Speaking of an ontological hiatus between the entities referred to as persons and society does not entail their being ontologically separate, it stresses only their ontological distinctiveness. Societies are not the same kinds of things as persons, they do not have the same properties, nor is the one reducible to the other. They are, though, mutually interdependent realities. Under other circumstances, whilst not referring to social life, this would not even appear as a problem. For instance, one could quite reasonably speak of an ontological hiatus between a wood and trees, without being taken to be asserting their ontological separation or the autonomy of the wood from the trees. It would not appear at all strange to speak of the properties of the ecosystem as a whole and assert that it possessed a reality different to that of trees. Any account of the emergent properties of the wood as a complex system, say the micro-climate, could not be reduced to the trees, but neither could it exclude reference to them. Exactly the same can be said of systems of social interaction, and it is this conception Bhaskar propounds in his elaboration of social being as 'four-planar', in which he explicitly includes persons, their subjectivity, along with interpersonal relations, and social and institutional relations, and material transactions with nature (which therefore encompasses, in varying ways, different parts of nature within the social, including human biology). (Bhaskar 1994, 96-7; Ch.5, *passim*.)

It is clear from this example that Pleasants imputes various contradictions to Bhaskar because he projects categories onto Bhaskar's meaning that are not there. In so doing he reveals the absence from his own conceptual horizons of those categories necessary for an understanding of Bhaskar's thought.

Hermeneutics and ontology

This brings me to the issue of the relation between metaphysics and hermeneutics. It is being argued here that accurate translations embody those categories embodied in the concepts being translated. Traditionally, this has been thought of in terms of being able to give an account of the 'presuppositions' of thought, and is, as Collingwood for instance sees it, the task of descriptive metaphysics. It is this conception that Wittgenstein is hostile towards. Collingwood (1998 [1940]) argued that it is the task of an historically sensitive descriptive metaphysics to give accounts of the presuppositions underlying the full range of hitherto existing conceptual horizons. Like Pleasants, he simply presupposed that contemporary thought was adequate to encompass all others. This, in turn, means that there is no recognition of the possibility of forcing conceptions embodying distinctive categories into conformity with the categories structuring the horizons of interpretation. The possibility that, under some circumstances, translation *entails* doing violence to meaning is effectively discounted from the start. This absence of a conception of the possibility of necessary interpretative damage follows from an implicit, and illicit, assumption of the universal capacities of the horizons from within which the

translation occurs. This is an issue that must be dealt with by any conception of interpretation. All philosophical work – whether descriptive, deconstructive or reconstructive – requires a conception of its object or objects of investigation (see, e.g., Strawson 1959, 9). Whether singular or plural, such conceptions will embody the categorial assumptions of the framework within which they are constructed.

This can be demonstrated in relation to Pleasants-Wittgenstein. Pleasants blocks off the possibility of addressing the significance of metaphysics for interpretation by conceiving of ontology in a particular way. An alternative conceptualisation of metaphysics, on the other hand, opens the way to their proper consideration. Pleasants' arguments can be seen in terms of the defensive and offensive strategies deployed by Wittgenstein. The base of the defensive position is (1) the general assertion that the object of ontology is non-rational in character. This is supplemented by two outposts. These are arguments that (2) ontology is not amenable to any form of rational 'proof' and that (3) ontological arguments are paradoxical because they must be self-referential, i.e. they must presuppose what they seek to show. Pleasants' offensive arguments are twofold. The first is his core case (and it follows from the defensive position) that (4) philosophical pictures are not amenable to rational scrutiny. Philosophical pictures can be criticised only indirectly by virtue of their irrational consequences. The second argument, however, does make a deontological, rather than consequentialist, point about the inherent character of philosophical pictures: (5) philosophical pictures are wrong because they embody category errors.

Non-rational object?

Pleasants pursues the first argument of Wittgenstein's by appearing to sustain a sharp distinction between the transitive and intransitive dimensions of knowledge by insisting on the distinction between what is being described and its description. By making this distinction, separating the thing from the description, Wittgenstein seeks to show the ways in which the descriptions used by philosophers need to be changed to exclude their attribution of false characteristics to linguistic practice. As I understand the logic of his argument, the use of expressions such as 'conforming to an attitude' or 'expressive of a disposition' or even 'consistent with categorial or ontological presuppositions' should not be taken to be referring to any such real aspects of linguistic practices involving such things as attitudes or dispositions or categories any more than the language of 'conforming to a rule' should be taken as a reference to some (causal and/or constitutive) presence of a rule in relation to an act. The implication here is that the metaphysicians, those dealing with the *a priori* or with 'presuppositions' said to be prior to linguistic use and intelligibility, are misguided in believing that they are tracing something implicit, in the sense of being present as part of non-actual reality, in the activity of language use.

It is important to stress the way in which Wittgenstein regards these things as not being present. Just as accounts of activities cannot be produced wholly in terms of conscious

reasons, so it could not be said that there is any necessary rational, reflective, mediation between people's use of language and the conformity (or otherwise) of that usage to the 'rules' discovered by the metaphysicians. The conception of metaphysics, then, that Wittgenstein rejects, is one which has as its object the rules applied in the mind to the use of language, such that linguistic practice appears to be algorithmically regulated in the style of a computer (see Putnam 1987 & 1992). It is just such a conception, and related 'psychologistic' theories of meaning, that Wittgenstein's intends to displace in the *Philosophical Investigations*, by stressing instead the importance, when describing activities and in trying to say what people might mean, of drawing attention to language use as a practical activity and to the context in which it takes place (Strawson, 1962). So, for Wittgenstein, the absence of rules from activities which can only be said to conform to them, is paralleled by the absence from speaking of 'presupposing' and of following logical rules in order to express a meaning.

There is though still room for other conceptions of metaphysics. It could be argued, for instance, that metaphysics, in seeking for 'presuppositions' and the categories implied by language usage, has purely transitive objects, in the sense that they exist and persist only through the activities of philosophers and have no existence, nor referent, beyond that. Transcendental arguments, for instance, could simply be extrapolating from ordinary language use into the realm of 'ontology' by various modes of logical elaboration. (The mistake of philosophers would be to think that this operation is performed in reverse when people actually speak.) Metaphysics could be regarded as producing descriptions of ontological implications, where the meaning of implicit is not something that is hidden, but is what is produced by following through certain investigations: a purely logical consequence. The question a metaphysician would be seen to be asking is 'what ontological extrapolations would be consistent with this or that language use?' This would run no risk of attempting to explain intelligible communication by reference back to the ontology. Nor would it be premised on the treatment of language usage as if it were actually making implicit ontological arguments. The ontology would be entirely *a posteriori*, not *a priori*. This would, however, leave unanswered the question of why it is that extrapolations from great swathes of language converge on the same specified ontologies. This, in turn, is related to the question of what the relation between the object of any descriptive ontology and the language from which it was derived might really be. The reconceptualisation of philosophy as a discipline concerned with categorial description and development, discussed below, will help here.

Descriptive vs reconstructive metaphysics

Pleasant's second argument against the rationality of ontology addresses the status of just these ontological extrapolations. He rejects any idea that ontological accounts produced in this way could be treated as a form of knowledge

(Ch.2, 5). The statements of ontology could only be believed as dogma, as a form of conviction, for there is no way in which they could be empirically proved or disproved. Pleasant concurs with the verdict on metaphysics made, again, by Collingwood (1998 [1940]): it can only ever be descriptive. Philosophical 'attitudes', such as idealisms, realisms, solipsisms, etc., cannot have rational grounds: they are just there, brute facts. When they are explicitly believed, as doctrines, they should be regarded as matters of purely 'subjective certainty': the best one can do is propagandise in favour of one's own framework, no more.

This position entails a disavowal of any treatment of ontological statements in deontological terms, i.e. it entails a stringent requirement to sustain a clear separation between describing and commenting critically on their substance. It means maintaining a fact-value dichotomy. Passing a judgement of rationality, or otherwise, on any particular metaphysical, ontological or categorial claim is to assume a strictly non-Wittgensteinian attitude, for none of the elements of a system of metaphysics are in and of themselves liable to such inquiry. So, for instance, taking Bhaskar to task for making the claim that there are grounds for making a distinction within ontology between the transitive and the intransitive dimensions, or for asserting that a rational case can be made for ontology by invoking referential detachment,⁵ would be to make a category error (Bhaskar 1994, 16). It is because such critical scrutiny is not rejected, because such constructive or revisionary metaphysics is regarded as susceptible to some form of rational assessment, that the problems of philosophy are said to arise. Philosophical pictures are pointless attempts to use reason to embody legislative rules about language use and meaningfulness. In the absence of any possible 'empirical proof' such 'laws' simply cannot be treated as rational.

This argument, however, cannot stand. For it is too broad-brush to be of any special significance for metaphysics.⁶ If it is accepted, it would not be possible to know, in the sense it assumes, what any knowledge is. This argument dismisses the cognitive claims of *all* arguments that cannot be verified or falsified empirically, including itself. The very argument that knowledge consists of those beliefs that have been confirmed or otherwise by empirical proof cannot itself be subject to empirical proof. Other reasons for holding rational beliefs must be available, otherwise the very notion of knowledge could make no sense.

Defensive arguments contradictory

Once the possibility of rational arguments is permitted, however, it might seem that ontological deductions could be treated as propositions and subject to critical scrutiny in their own right – even if still not regarded as causally related to any actual language use. Pleasant's third argument, however, is of special relevance to metaphysics, but muddies the waters considerably. Metaphysical arguments are now disbarred because they are held to be inherently paradoxical by virtue of being self-referential. I take this to mean that that they presuppose what they seek to prove. This is a version of Collingwood's argu-

ment against reconstructive ontology. For Collingwood, ontologies are systems of ‘presuppositions’ that are prior to interpretation and that constitute interpretative frameworks, while the task of metaphysics is to describe them. The components of any system cannot be treated as arguments because of the paradox of their being self-referential, as these presuppositions are held to be prior to all propositions, and to constitute their conditions of intelligibility. All arguments about presuppositions would entail those very presuppositions.

This apparently vicious circularity would prevent any rational assessment of different systems of presuppositions: they would all be self-confirming and other-disconfirming. It would also account for the ban on a reconstructive philosophy that sought to change its own presuppositions. The necessity of the circularity of any argument predicated on an existing set of presuppositions means that presuppositions can only be revealed and described, not changed. Any argument of this kind, however, creates a difficulty for Pleasants in that it stands only if the original assumptions about transitivity are jettisoned. As the real preconditions of interpretation, such ontologies must be regarded as intransitive objects of philosophy, in the sense that they exist prior to philosophical investigation into them. They are also intransitive in the sense that they are conceived to be immune to change by philosophical labour.

This inquiry into the defensive position has revealed a paradox: the arguments for the non-rational status of the objects of philosophy rest on quite contradictory accounts. It will also reveal (below) an internal contradiction between the elements of the offensive positions. The Wittgensteinian response to this would be to try harder to abstain from philosophical pictures. The alternative is to go yet deeper into these pictures in order to search out the categorial absences which give rise to such problems.

Logicisation of being

The central problem of formulations, such as Collingwood’s, of descriptive metaphysics is the use of the term ‘presupposition’ to speak about the preconditions of intelligible communication. Some of the preconditions of communication must be cognitive, in as much as some prior knowledge is required. However, ontology is also concerned with non-cognitive preconditions of cognition. So long as ‘presuppositions’ carries cognitive connotations its use falls foul of the Wittgensteinian objections as well as of realist objections that it collapses the distinction between knowledge and its conditions of existence in a form of the epistemic fallacy. The defensive position is partially correct. There will be problems as long as the object of metaphysics is limited to extrapolated or deduced systems of *meanings*. A realist approach recognises that systems of meanings can be subject to philosophical investigation, but holds that the purpose of such investigations is to identify the categories they embody and any problems that arise as a result.

Collingwood does point to the appropriate methods for pursuing these forms of investigation: Kant’s transcendental deduction and Hegel’s dialectics. Kant’s method of transcendental deduction, he argues, is the means *par excellence* for arriving at descriptions of necessary presuppositions (or logically implied ontological statements). Hegel’s dialectic, on the other hand, is ideal for correcting mistakes in such descriptions because it works through the necessary relations within the overall system of presuppositions in order to achieve internal consistency, rendering Hegel’s dialectic ultimately subordinate to the requirements of analytic logic. The conception of ontology to which this gives rise, then, is bounded by two requirements: in addition to being solely concerned with systems of implied meanings, it also entails that there must be analytic consistency between the elements of the overall system of meaning. One critical implication of this conception of ontology as an analytically coherent system of meanings is that relations between things are conceived as logical relations. Together, these two requirements legislate two kinds of illicit identification: the general identification of the ontological with the meaningful, leading to the identification of being with thought; the specific identification of real relations with analytical logical ones. This ‘logicisation of being’ means that the absence of change is necessarily embodied in all conceptions of being, and not just in conceptions of interpretation.

The instability of this conception can be demonstrated by following through Collingwood’s own arguments about descriptive metaphysics. His account of Kant and Hegel generates two contrasts: in addition to that between implicit presuppositions and those made explicit by Kant’s methods, there must be added that between correct and incorrect explicit accounts of them revealed by Hegel’s. The question then arises as to which set of presuppositions really constitutes the framework of interpretation: the set of explicit, but partial and/or false ones, or the set of implicit ones? Or some other combination? The reason this is a question at all is because explicit presuppositions, whether correct or not, are used in practice as criteria of judgement of what counts as rational or reasonable, e.g. Wittgenstein’s propounding the requirement for ‘empirical proof’, or Giddens’ and Bhaskar’s repudiating ‘ontological dualism’. Putnam’s solution (1987) to this problem (reminiscent of Giddens’) is to invoke an open ended ‘dialectic of immanent (or implicit) and transcendent (or explicit) reason’, in which the practices of reasoning are continually transformed in the light of reflection on them. This is close to a dialectical realist response. It recognises a distinction between the characteristics embodied in practices of reasoning and the accounts of those characteristics. It further recognises that these accounts of reasoning can be critical of such practices, which can then be changed in the light of them. In making such an argument Putnam is clearly rejecting the implications of necessary internal consistency between linguistic practice and the different modes of being of ‘presuppositions’. He does this by differentiating between characteristics and accounts of them

instead of between presuppositions and propositions.

Realist metaphysics shares this account, but goes a step further. In working through categorial problems of error and absence, realist metaphysics is opposed to the notion that the only possible categories are either logical extrapolations from given sets of meanings, or the characteristics of specific forms of reasoning. It is oriented towards an additional, absent, object: those categories needed to describe the real preconditions of *all* linguistic practice, those which need to be embodied in meanings used to refer in a fulsome, rounded way to the world.

Offensive arguments contradictory

The sense in which transcendental and dialectical arguments can be said to reveal both the properties of language as well as other realities needs some clarification. Pleasants own offensive arguments about metaphysics are very useful here. The prime argument, stressed by Pleasants, is the consequentialist one that inconsistencies necessarily follow from 'philosophical pictures'. This argument, Wittgenstein insists, can only be made in a consequentialist sense because of the defensive arguments about not engaging in pseudo-rational discussion of such pictures. However, despite the strictures to the contrary, the offensive stance against philosophical pictures is in practice supplemented by an argument about the inherent nature of such pictures, i.e. that the pictures engendered by philosophising are reified, quasi-universals. Wittgenstein bemoans the philosopher's constitutional commitment to reified, partial abstractions and accounts of things that embody reductive explanations in illicit generalisations. This is not a consequentialist argument. It is a deontological argument against metaphysical pictures on the grounds that they embody category errors and are therefore irrational universals.

By characterising philosophical pictures as embodying reification, or reduction, Pleasants is ascribing to them certain categorial properties. These properties are precisely those which it is the proper task of philosophy to discern. It is a task which is inherently evaluative, as such properties are directly related to the question of consistency. It is one feature of Bhaskar's project in *Dialectic* to develop an elaborate catalogue of the problematic properties of conceptual objects. These descriptive and evaluative terms provide the language in which conceptual objects or the structure of conceptualisations are to be understood. Metaphysical inquiry, then, can describe some of those features, or properties, and is an aid to the practical transformation of those very practices. This, rather than the elaboration of 'presuppositions', is the task of descriptive metaphysics.

In Bhaskar's term illicit universals and other modes of misconception embody a wide range of categorial errors and absences. A full classification, if not exhaustive list, of possible illicit abstractions is generated in two ways. In *Dialectic* Ch.2, S.7 he investigates the errors related to his conception of concrete universals. This generates the first set of classes of errors: destratification; deprocessualization; demediation and desingularization. In this con-

text it is possible to give only an indication of the ramifications of each of these. Destratification entails the collapse of the distinction between different levels of reality, such as that between those aspects available to the senses and those not; deprocessualisation occurs when something is conceived in abstraction from its temporality, and from the changes to which it is subject over time; demediation is a feature of abstractions that exclude real causal and constitutive mediations; desingularisation subsumes individuals under more general accounts and excludes those very features that make them individuals. The second set follows from the absence of a recognition of any of the categories around which *Dialectic* is organised. The categories are non-identity relations; absence, totality and agency. Destratification is an example of errors associated with non-identity; denegativisation occurs whenever real absences are excluded from a conception of something; detotalisation can be recognised in accounts of things that render their aspects as separate fragments, with ontological extensionalism being a prime example; de-agentification renders things as atomic and/or inert, abstracting away causal powers by absenting or externalising them.

Rethinking Wittgenstein, understanding Bhaskar

One implication of this investigation is that it is possible to reconceptualise (redescribe) what Wittgenstein was doing. Metaphysicians and philosophers can, after all, be said to legislate when they produce metaphysical pictures. However, in doing so they can be seen to provide arguments that enshrine, in fallacies, the categorial properties of existing conceptions. Extrapolating from conceptions that embody categorial error and absences, they derive consequences that are used to reinforce them. This is what Wittgenstein exposes through immanent critique. Enshrining errors and absences in 'legislative' conceptions reinforces tendencies towards stasis. By exposing them in the way he does, Wittgenstein makes a contribution to the possibility of realising change. However, a conception of philosophy as purely deconstructive obscures the extent to which it entails descriptive and evaluative philosophy and simultaneously closes down the possibility of actively engaging in reconstructive philosophy. All three modes of philosophy are internally related in that each does require the other in practice. So, for instance, supplementing the deconstructive revelation of inconsistencies with a description of the categorial error generating it depends on the reconstructive role having identified a relation not previously identified or pointing out some other categorial absence.

In conclusion, Bhaskar's conception of philosophy is at some distance from that with which Wittgenstein, and many others, have worked. It confirms the central place of a reconstructive metaphysics oriented towards both the categorial properties of particular discourses and towards the categorial properties of all linguistic practices and contexts and other realities. Amongst its most potent tools are transcendental arguments, but these are encom-

passed by a conception of dialectical arguments that seek to explain paradoxes by reference to absent, necessary, categories.

The query around which this investigation revolved was the hermeneutic difficulty facing Pleasants' in his engagement with Bhaskar. What this inquiry has revealed is that Pleasants does not, and Wittgenstein did not, understand Bhaskar's conception and practice of philosophy. What accounts for this is that their thought is structured by categorial properties, and contains substantive misconceptions, such that a proper translation of Bhaskar's meaning is not possible. This is not to say that Wittgenstein was, or that Pleasants is, unable to understand what Bhaskar means. It is just to say that developing conceptual horizons that can adequately encompass Bhaskar's categorial system is a precondition of being able to do so.

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Notes

1. Compatibilism is meant to cover that range of doctrines that holds the two ideas, human free will and natural determinism, to be mutually consistent, whilst incompatibilism holds them to be inconsistent.
2. These arguments were previously published in Pleasants (1997), with almost identical points appearing in King (1999).
3. The full ramifications and significance of Bhaskar's 'ontologisation of emergence' are almost impossible to overstate. In terms of the development of his categorial system in *Dialectic* (1993) it can be related to all four of the major themes: non-identity; absence; totality; agency. Some details of this are given in the paragraphs preceding my concluding remarks.
4. One does not need to rely solely on Bhaskar for this. See, for instance, Ollman 1976 & 1993; and Morin (1974).
5. Referential detachment refers to the implicit distinction between an act and the things to which the act is oriented.
6. Putnam (1992) makes a similar argument.

⊗ ABSTRACTS

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From the Actual to the Real: Left Wing Documentary Film in Australia 1946-1996

(Ph.D., Media, Queensland University of Technology, 1999)

This thesis constructs and develops a critique of the tradition of left wing documentary film in Australia. The critique is from the perspective of the Critical Realist paradigm developed by Roy Bhaskar and others. The thesis is both an attempt to critique a tradition and to provide a new basis for documentary theory and criticism. On the theoretical level the thesis engages the work of the leading documentary film theorists including Noel Carroll, Bill Nichols, Paula Rabinowitz, Michael Renov and Trinh T. Minh-ha. These theorists

take up positions, which range from New Realist to Poststructuralist. It is the contention of this thesis that, because they lack a notion of a stratified ontology, they are unable to sustain either a critique, or a coherent account, of documentary practice.

The definition of left wing that underpins the selection of the films is a narrow one, namely, coming from or influenced by the Marxist tradition. The criticism of the films begins with Joris Ivens *Indonesia Calling* (1946) and concludes with Tom Zubrycki's *Billal* (1996).