Evaluating trust, competition and cooperation: a realist perspective

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I. Introduction

My allotted task here is to question whether the relatively abstract, philosophically-oriented social theory systematised as critical realism can have anything to say about the (relative or absolute) desirability of the social processes of trust, competition and cooperation. This question, however, is sub-ordinate to the broader and prior matter of whether realist social theory can have anything legitimate to say at all concerning matters of ethics. Reason for doubt stems from the recognition that broadly philosophy-of-science projects or perspectives do not connect directly to substantive claims or concrete policy orientations. This applies to the perspective systematised as critical realism as much as any other; substantive claims and policy stances do not warrant being identified as critical realist theories or policies. In particular, movement from a philosophical position to any political stance necessitates the supplementation of the former with empirical claims.

Does it follow thereby that projects such as critical realism are inherently devoid of ethical implications? I do not think so. Here I want to indicate something of what I believe does follow concerning matters of ethics. The primary aim of this paper is thus clarification and elaboration. Because the allotted question of evaluating trust, competition and cooperation is effectively a special case of my central topic here, the following arguments concerning them must be seen as somewhat preliminary, laying the grounds for a more extensive examination to be pursued on another occasion. I do eventually address the issue of the desirability of trust, competition and cooperation. But I do so only briefly, as a secondary issue to determining the implications for a position on ethics more generally.

I. Limits of Realist Social Theory

Before defining some of my terms let me briefly rehearse some of the reasons why a project like critical realism does not lead directly to substantive-theoretical or policy claims. First and foremost critical realism is a philosophical project with a primary orientation towards ontology (the nature of being or existence). By examining

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the preconditions of generalised features of experience, including certain generalised features of successful scientific practices, critical realism has been concerned with what the world must be like for such practices even to be possible. On the basis of insights achieved via this sort of investigation, it has in turn been possible to indicate something of the limits of further practices including potentially successful social-scientific ones.

As a result of its noted orientation critical realism has tended to provide insights at a relatively high level of abstraction. At the level of ontology in particular it has indicated that reality both natural and social is structured, open, and differentiated. It is structured in the sense of including but being irreducible to, actualities such as events and states of affairs and our experiences of them. It is open in that the sense that event regularities are not ubiquitous, due especially to the multiple, and perpetually shifting mix of, (both stable and unstable) causes of events. It is differentiated in that closures, sustaining event regularities, do occur under some, but only under some, very specific conditions, in certain realms. It is a further insight of critical realism that social reality in particular is especially dynamic and constituted to a significant degree by internally-related totalities.

However it is not, and has never been, a part of the critical realist project to uncover or investigate the specific structures and processes that emerge. This is the job of the individual sciences. Nor is it possible at the level of abstraction at which critical realist insights have been gained to suggest other than very general criteria that will prove relevant in any explanatory situation. Explanatory criteria too are mostly a matter of context and to be determined within the practices of the relevant science(s).

Of course, many researchers who have contributed to, or who are informed by, the project of critical realism, also do science including social theory. However, the most that might reasonably be claimed of any resulting substantive positions and policy orientations developed by these people is precisely that they are produced by individuals acting on the basis of the critical realist understanding of the nature of science, nature and society.

But why not attach the ‘critical realist’ label to theories or explanations, etc., uncovered by individuals acting on the insights, or accepting the perspective, of critical realism? Notice, first of all, that, given the open, dynamic and holistic nature of features of reality, it would not be surprising if different social scientists informed by the critical realist perspective came up with competing explanations of a given phenomenon. Indeed, they frequently do. In this case it is obviously inappropriate to refer to any one explanation as the critical realist account of the phenomenon in question. Of course, the aim remains the pursuit of truth, and it is to be hoped that by way of subjecting competing hypotheses to empirical and other forms of assessment, an account emerges that is seen to outperform the others in terms of explanatory power, etc., and thereby to gain widespread acceptance. But even if and where agreement of this sort is reached there can be no supposition that the account in question will not be revised or displaced in due course. All knowledge is fallible, partial and likely transient. Indeed, if progress is to be achieved continuous transformations in even our currently most explanatorily powerful accounts are to be encouraged. Thus at no stage can a substantive theory be said to qualify as the critical realist one.

Critical realism is thus ontologically bold but epistemologically cautious.

Of course, not only substantive, but also ontological, claims are fallible, including, needless to say, those systematised within the project of critical realism. Where the latter are found wanting, the outcome will presumably be a transformation in, or (if the relevant critique is very subversive) a transcendence or sublation of, critical realism. But this recognition does not affect the claim that critical realism per se is not supported by, and does not lead directly to, particular substantive theories. Rather the elaboration of critical realism starts from premises concerning generalised features of experience, and proceeds by elaborating their conditions of possibility. The central method is that of transcendental argument. The defence of critical realism turns upon transcendental arguments starting from premises concerning generalised features of experience accepted by proponents and opponents of critical realism alike (see Lawson, 1997, 1998; Fleetwood, 1999). The sustainability of particular substantive accounts does not come into it. The relevance and sustainability of critical realism is quite consistent with the fact that a range of often competing substantive and political positions is to be found amongst those who contribute to the project.

If this assessment is accepted, the obvious concern is whether a broadly philosophy-of-science oriented project like critical realism can have anything to say in terms of ethical stances and moral objectives. As already noted, I believe it can. But before pursuing this matter I need to define some of my terms.

2. Some Definitions

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2 For a lengthier discussion of this point see especially Lawson 1996.
The position in ethics I am wanting to explicate here is a moral realism, a position that complements the scientific realist orientation that previously I have often explicitly formulated and defended (e.g., Lawson, 1997). Let me indicate something of what I understand by these ascriptions before attempting to ground a specific moral realist position.

I note, first of all, that any position might be designated a realism (in the philosophical sense of the term) that asserts the existence of some disputed kind of entity (such as black holes, class relations, economic equilibria, gravitons, human nature, utilities). Clearly on this definition we are all realists of a kind, and there are very many conceivable realisms.

In science, a realist position, i.e. a scientific realism asserts that the ultimate objects of scientific investigation exist for the most part quite independent of, or at least prior to, their investigation. A moral realism, as I understand the position, is similarly concerned with existence. It asserts the existence of moral properties irreducible to people's beliefs and attitudes, or (moral) judgements, as to what is right and wrong. Moral statements or judgements, which can be true or false (or approximately true, etc.), should be construed as assertions about moral properties of actions, persons, policies, objectives, etc. Moral predicates refer to properties of such objects of moral assessment.

My claim, defended below, is that moral propositions can be social scientifically investigated and thereby criticised, or defended. Alternatively put, there is an intransitive realm to moral reasoning. I recognise that actual moralities, i.e., sets of moral beliefs, of any given society can be numerous. However, I am of the view that (as with other forms of belief) all moral claims, because about an objective moral order, are fallible, partial, explicable and transformable.

Importantly for my position, it is just because we cannot avoid acting in an already moralised world that a rational assessment, a grounding or critique, of our values is required. And, I also believe, it is just because values are always immanent in our practices that meaningful or efficacious normative or moral discourse is possible. Thus I do not suppose that ethics is autonomous from science or history.

In short, I am wanting to suggest that such moral terms as good, bad, reasonable, just, fair, etc., tend to pick out or reference real properties of relations or actions, and that our methods of scientific and moral reasoning are able to determine which actions, policies, objectives, etc., have these properties.

3. Human Flourishing

The moral property with which I shall be mainly concerned here is that of (moral) good. I shall thus be concerned to defend the realist position that moral goodness is a real property of actions, policies, states of affairs, objectives, and so forth.

I am here also primarily concerned with human being. Although I do not want to limit the content of moral

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3 Notice that such a position is quite consistent with an epistemological relativism, i.e., with the recognition that all knowledge claims are partial, fallible, situated and likely transient (as I have argued at length elsewhere [Lawson, 1997]). I emphasise this explicitly here just because many commentators interested in developing an ethical stance similar to that pursued below appear to suppose otherwise. An example is provided by Martha Nussbaum who cautions: "...the attack on realism has been sufficiently deep and sufficiently sustained that it would appear strategically wise for an ethical and political view that seeks broad support not to rely on the truth of metaphysical realism, if it can defend itself in any other way" (1995, p. 69). Nussbaum is clear that she means "By metaphysical realism .. the view..that there is some determinate way the world is, apart from the interpretive workings of the cognitive faculties of living beings" (p. 68). But if (in this otherwise excellent contribution) Nussbaum is accepting that realists necessary suppose either/both that all reality is independent of us and our practices, or/and that somehow we grasp it in a manner unmediated by our human capacities and limitations, culturally and socially and physically situated perspectives, current understandings and so forth, she is quite wrong; she is reducing realism to a naive absolutist version indeed. In truth, Nussbaum is giving far too much ground to her postmodernist or 'relativist' opponents. It seems, then, important that I emphasise at the outset that realists are no more committed to absolutism than relativists are to irreality. Rather the question is what forms of realist and relativist perspectives to combine in specific contexts. By combining ontological (scientific) realism and epistemological relativism we obtain not judgemental relativism but judgemental rationality of just the sort the Nussbaum wishes to sustain.
theorising to human being, I do take the latter to be an object of moral discourse. Indeed I take it that some view about human nature, or an anthropology, is an essential input to, in fact a condition of, moral discourse. Any sustainable conception of human nature offered, of course, could not reasonably be of an a-historical nature. And doubtless any conception held will itself be refined or transformed in the explanatory or analytical process. But just as an ontology is presupposed by any epistemological account (see e.g., Lawson, 1997, p. 62) so an anthropology is a presupposition of any discussion in ethics. Just as any cognitive claim presupposes an implicit view of the nature of reality, so any moral claim implicitly presupposes a conception of human nature.

It seems to me, then, that moral discourse has these features in common: an anthropology is presupposed, (some⁴) being is implicitly (at least) taken as having, or perhaps being, intrinsic worth or value, and actions which facilitate human being and well being, or survival and flourishing, are considered to be morally good.

II. A Specific Moral Realism

I now return to the question as to whether a broadly philosophy-of-science oriented project like critical realism can have anything to say in terms of ethical stances and moral objectives. My starting point, as I say, is a conception of human nature. Without one, talk of moral conduct is idle. Further, without a conception of commonalities in human nature, hope for strategies of moral conduct is likely to be ungrounded. I have indeed argued elsewhere the case for certain commonalities in our (historical) species being. But so too I have argued both for commonalities, though less general, in our social being, as well as particularities at the level of our individualities (Lawson, 1999). Let me sketch the arguments and signal their relevance.

Broadly, and trivially, because we engage in numerous generalised practices we can infer that we must have the relevant capacities so to engage. It follows that human beings possess numerous generalised capacities. It also follows that we have at least the needs to realise these capacities. It seems to be a generalised feature of our experience, for example, that (those we classify as) human beings mostly engage in speech acts. For this to happen we clearly must have the capacity to do so. This capacity, indeed, seems to be part of our species being, a commonality that appears to distinguish us from other species. Any such capacities evolve, of course. Even at this high level of abstraction the conception of human nature sustained is not ahistorical. Still we humans do seem to have universal capacities of this sort. We thus have a universal need to realise any such capacities.

It remains the case, of course, that capacities such as that for language use can be realised only in a specific concrete form; people speak not in the abstract but in (versions of) Spanish, French or English, etc. Thus, at a lower level of abstraction, we have a social, indeed a space-time culturally regionally specific nature.

Ultimately, of course, at a lower level of abstraction still, we have our own individual mix of language competencies, and so forth. We are specific concrete individuals.

There are then various different levels of human nature, including a common one. Needs equally are

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⁴ Accepting the sort of position to which I am disposed, it also makes sense to ask whether morally good actions are necessarily oriented only to human being. Certainly animals and plants can be said to have needs or conditions that are part of their being. Thus it might be supposed, by extension, that they too have intrinsic worth. If so, is it not morally good ceteris paribus to be concerned for their well being as well?

This will be going too far for many. Opponents of this suggestion may well respond that intrinsic worth stops with human being. But why should or does it? Remember we are talking, here, of intrinsic worth residing in being, not of our preferences.

Of course, if on the other hand we suppose that it is arbitrary to assert that intrinsic worth stops with human beings the question quickly arises as to where if anywhere, and on what basis, we might draw the line in the other direction. If all being has value why stop at plants and animals? Does a mountain, or a cliff-top, say, not have a mode of being, and so too the planet earth, and the universe? So too, presumably, does even a lump of rock. Do they then all have value, possess intrinsic worth? That they do is the sort of position developed by some in ‘deep ecology’. I do not want to take up these issues here. Indeed, I admit to being quite unsure as to where and how lines should be drawn. But I mention these considerations to help illustrate something more of the sort of moral realist position to which I am inclined, as well as to indicate the sorts of issues and indeed puzzles that the adoption of such a position raises. For a relevant discussion of such issues see especially Collier (1999).
structured. Indeed we have needs to develop our capacities at every level. Needs, as opposed to mere wants, can be defined as anything whose satisfaction contributes to our survival and flourishing. Clearly we can have needed and unneeded wants. Perhaps too we can have wants that are inconsistent with our needs. Clearly many parents believe this of their children, and medical researchers of all of us.

Needs can be unconsciously held. Elsewhere I have argued, for example, that the routinised nature of human existence is satisfied by the unconscious need for sameness and continuity in life (see Lawson, 1997, chapter 13).

Needs then are essential to human being. And from the conception defended it follows that we are beings that both can be true to ourselves, that can act consistently with our species and social/community and our highly concrete/individual being, and also can make mistakes, and act in ways that are not in accord with our real needs and interests.

It is immediately clear I think that at the level of the common or species nature as well as the concrete individual nature we are capable of acting against ourselves. But this is equally true at the level of our social/community being. At any recent and not so recent point in time, and for the conceivable future, we exist in society, and flourish through it. As Marx somewhere points out we can individuate ourselves only in society. Thus the conditions for our flourishing will be in part societal ones, including grounds of trust, solidarity, truth, fraternity, and so forth. To undermine any such conditions, or to act inconsistently with them, is thus equally to act against ourselves.

1. The Good Society

Although these considerations remain at a high level of abstraction they do, I suggest, bear on matters of ethics. At the very least, it seems to me, these considerations both entail that an essential element of our ethical deliberations will necessarily be a form of society, and also enable us to say something about it. I take it that a society that forces us to act against our real natures and interests can hardly be described as ethically good. Thus, given the stratified or multi-layered conception of the human subject uncovered in critical realism, along with the interdependency of us all, it seems that any conception of the good society, as Marx as well as Bhaskar have also previously concluded, can only be one in which the flourishing of each is a condition for the flourishing of all, just as the flourishing of all is a condition of the flourishing of each. Or as Marx somewhere formulates it: "the free development of each is a condition of the free development of all". Given our best understanding of human nature this is the only conception which allows a society in which we are true, each of us, to ourselves, as needy, socially formed human individuals.

Notice, incidently, that I am not particularly concerned how we label such a society. Socialism is a candidate. For many however, this category carries the connotations of centralised, often dictatorial, state planning. This was not the original meaning of the term of course (see Hodgson, 1999). And in any case all categories are continuously contested and open to revision in the light of new understandings. Still the attachment of such connotations seems to make it desirable to seek an alternative label. Here I shall refer to the conception in question either simply as the good society or sometimes, following Aristotle, as recently encouraged by Bhaskar, the eudemonistic society.

Is such a configuration a real possibility? If it is, and given that ex posteroi it seems difficult to conceive of any alternative that is also consistent with generalised human flourishing, I think we can, with reason, accept that those actions, or at least a subset of them, which help bring such a society about, or, which is the same thing, work to absent impediments to it, qualify as morally good ceteris paribus. Under these circumstances it is only a subset of such actions that are relevant. Because we start from here, and the here and now counts as well, we can accept as morally good only those actions which both work to remove impediments to the good society and are themselves, as far as is possible, developmentally consistent with it. That is, if we are to be true to ourselves including our goals, we ought to endeavour to ensure that the actions which are aimed at bringing the good society about are, where possible, consistent with the values of the sort of society we wish to usher in. Of course, it remains the case that the future, including our natures, our conceptions of it, our technological and other possibilities, are open. It is for this reason that we can aim only at being developmentally consistent, at doing the best we can to move in the direction that seems the most sustainable starting from here.

So is the good society a real possibility? As far as I can see: yes, if we continually prosecute actions that contribute to facilitating human survival and flourishing. Given our (fallible but hopefully developmentally
progressive) understanding of (developmentally open) human nature, the relation of human beings to social structure and nature, and developmental possibilities in all aspects and their inter-relations, we can identify constraints upon human flourishing, and work to discover ways of absenting them consistent with our conception of the good society (itself an open process).

Of course there may often be practical problems in identifying constraints on human needs or the causes of human ills, and/or in distinguishing needs from mere wants. But these are merely a part of the practical difficulties and goals of science (as well as of all other forms reasoning). If wants or the way we chose to satisfy them are actually out of kilter with our needs, this means that the individual(s) in question has/have false beliefs at some level. It is quite within the remit of science to reveal false beliefs (or cognitive ills) -- perhaps concerning the implications of consuming irradiated lamb, BSE infected beef, of having asbestos in the home -- and of explaining the causes S of false beliefs, especially where the holding of the latter are difficult to understand. If the identifying of false beliefs can be termed descriptive critique explaining them deserves the name of explanatory critique.

Once a cause of human ills has been identified the point ceteris paribus must be to formulate actions designed to absent them, or, to absent constraints on the absenting of ills and so forth. How do we decide the sort of action to take to achieve this? As already noted, we require, where feasible, strategies consistent with the sort of outcome we hope to achieve, with the process that is the good society. Their formulation is likely often to necessitate exercises in concrete utopianism, i.e., thinking in terms of possibilities or scenarios that appear desirable and consistent with our understanding of human social and technological, etc., potentials, as well as ideas about the transition.

This is a topic I expand upon a little below. At this point I merely reiterate that it is difficult to imagine that any sustainable end state or process of such informed concrete practical judgements oriented to human flourishing could be other than a good society in which the free flourishing of each is a condition of the free flourishing of all. At the same time I see no reason to suppose that such actions could not usher such an end-state in. In short the good society seems entirely feasible (though seemingly not just around the corner).

Now it warrants emphasis that this sort of highly abstract argument, as with most others generating the results systematised under the heading of critical realism, establishes only the existence of a (real) possibility: of a conception of the good society. It is, though, a possibility grounded ex posteriiori in generalised facts of experience. Perhaps the process of reasoning applied in reaching such a formulation will seem to economists to bear some resemblance to the derivation of existence theorems in modern economics, as illustrated, for example, by general equilibrium theory. Above, we have established the sort of outcome -- the good society (not an equilibrium) -- that would be consistent in some sense with the initial specifications. The significant difference between what I am elaborating here and the travails of modern economists with their `solution concepts', of course, is that whilst in the case of the latter the initial specifications concerning human beings and their situations are always and necessarily fictitious -- designed to achieve mathematical tractability, and so closure of an open system -- in the case of the discussion above the endeavour is to posit a `solution', specifically a concept of the eudemonistic society, consistent with our best understanding of human nature and society and manner in which individuals (and groups) and society inter-relate.

The conception achieved, however, does share with (some versions of) equilibrium theory the stimulus, once a `solution' (here of the eudemonistic society) is conceived, to question whether the configuration formulated is not merely possible, but the limit point or process of an operative tendency. After all there are so many imaginable scenarios which, if often unlikely, cannot be ruled out a priori. The interesting question is whether there is actually a mechanism of sorts at work in the social world to bring it towards the eudemonistic process. Without some such ethical mechanism, deliberations may yet be largely pointless if meaningful. I believe there is such an identifiable mechanism, though I realise this is likely the more contentious part of my position, resisted even by others sympathetic to (and thus part of a possible debate within) the project of critical realism. However, it seems to me that the claim there is such as mechanism is tantamount to the thesis of moral realism. Let me run through my argument.

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5 I anticipate that contrastive explanation can play a significant role at this point. Contrastive explanation does its work by focusing on a situation where we are surprised at the outcome. Our surprise suggests to ourselves that there is something interesting to explain and that we knew enough prior to the outcome to have expect two situations to be the same or to have stood in some particular relation. Thus we have reason to suppose something is going on and that it can be identified. This reasoning is as relevant to the sphere of cognitive and other ills as any other.
2. A Tendency to Move Towards the Good Society

I turn to the crux of the matter: whether there is at least an identifiable operative tendency pushing us in the direction of the good society. By this I do not ask ‘must the good society come about?’ The answer to this would have to be no. The future, clearly, is open, and we are quite capable even of destroying ourselves as a species. What I mean is: is there a mechanism, a tendency at work, giving us a perpetual prodding, an impulse, towards the good society. I believe there is: that mechanism just is the tendency for each and all of us, as rational, knowledgeable and capable individuals to act much of the time, at least with intent, in keeping with the nature of our real being, needs or interests, that is, to promote the cause of human flourishing. I do not adopt an atomistic-individualist stance here of course. As I have already suggested, to act for, and in the interests of, others is ultimately to act for oneself and vice-versa; our flourishing depends on the prevalence of conditions of trust, truth, solidarity, fraternity, etc., and at some level I believe we, most of us, most of the time, appreciate this.

Consider, for example, the case of cognitive ills. Beliefs, including false ones, have their causes, and constitute proper objects of social scientific study; they are as explicable as other social phenomena. If and where sets of beliefs are shown to be false, and their grounds identified, accepting only the commitment to truth and consistency implicit in the willingness to engage in all discourse, we do, I believe, pass immediately to a negative evaluation of the mechanism(s) responsible for any unearthed falsity, other things being equal.

If, say, we find in a court of law that X has mistakenly been believed to be, and charged as, guilty of a crime, and if we find that this false belief is generated by detection process Z (perhaps a racist culture reproduced within the arresting police force, or an expert of sorts who makes mistakes, or even a faulty mechanical detection device), we immediately become negatively disposed towards this particular process, person or factor, ceteris paribus, and positively disposed ceteris paribus towards actions designed to rectify the situation.

If a child repeatedly gets the wrong answers in mathematics, and we find this is due to a faulty calculator we are immediately inclined to mend or replace the calculator, ceteris paribus.

More generally, if the child (or whoever) is muddled or confused on some issue, and we can identify the cause of the confusion, we are negatively disposed to the cause ceteris paribus and inclined to absent it ceteris paribus.

If a scientist, research group, or, say, television documentary team knowingly generate(s) misleading or false claims, results or reports, and we, the ‘audience’, eventually discover the falsity of these claims, etc., we immediately pass to a negative evaluation of their perpetrators ceteris paribus.

More radically, if social science shows that beliefs held about a society by its members are false, and if that same science shows, say, that these beliefs are both generated by, and a condition of, the very organising mechanism of that society itself, we, the economists included, are, or ought to be, negatively disposed to that society, ceteris paribus, and positively disposed to attempts to transform it in a relevant manner ceteris paribus. (This, of course, whatever the validity of the content, it precisely the form or nature of Marx’s critique of capitalism.)

The last example will likely seem the most contentious I suspect, just because many will hold that even a society which generates such ills may yet be better than imaginable alternatives. Such possibilities are, of course, allowed for by my repeated use of the ceteris paribus, or ‘other things being equal’, clause. Given my regular invoking of it I will below examine the practical effect of this qualifying manoeuvre. For the time being I concentrate on establishing the point that we do at least come immediately to evaluate the causes of ills negatively ceteris paribus.

To put things slightly differently, I am suggesting that in our actions we effectively accept the good or eudemonic society as a goal already. Of course, it is usually dimly, vaguely or poorly formulated at best. And it will exist alongside other competing, perhaps inconsistent objectives. Nevertheless I believe the eudemonic society is already implicit in our actions.

Interestingly, when I have proposed to others the above formulation of the good society -- i.e., a society in which the free flourishing of each is a condition of the free flourishing of all -- the typical initial response has been something like: “the problem with that formulation is that it is so abstract or formal as to be acceptable to almost everyone”. I agree with this. And it is essential to my position that this is so. The point at which participants in normative discourse mainly disagree, I believe, is in putting substance to this formulation: deciding what human nature is; whether the are indeed commonalities in human nature; how the fulfilment of human needs are best facilitated; and so forth. In other words our disagreements concern matters that science in particular can help us to
sort out. As long as the formal criterion is acceptable to, and accepted by, us all (albeit in implicit and vague ways), it follows that a tendency or impulse to the good society is continually in play. It is also follows that social theory, including economics properly executed, just is moral philosophy albeit itself necessarily conceived as science.

Let me put this slightly differently again. Basically the formulation I defend is that because human beings have real needs, i.e., features whose satisfaction is essential to human survival and flourishing, it is imperative that we act to absent unwanted obstacles to, or constraints upon, the satisfaction of these needs. This is not a technical imperative: if you want this do that. Rather it is an assertoric imperative: since you need this do that (remove the obstacle to achieving it). Science can reveal needs, the obstacles to their satisfaction, and causes of the obstacles. To identify such causes, as I noted above, constitutes an explanatory critique. Being true to ourselves means we ought to work to remove remedial constraints on our being and well-being. Because of our mutual dependency on, indeed constitution through, each other, this means working to remove constraints upon the flourishing of us all. Resisting this conclusion commits us to performative contradictions, to theory/practice inconsistencies. My claim that a tendency to the good society is in play is seen just to be a claim that there is a tendency for us to be true to ourselves.

A yet further way of putting this is to say that the truth of moral realism as formulated here and the existence of a tendency to the good society presuppose each other; the fact of each is a condition of the other. For my claim, in effect, is that the tendency to the good society consists in human beings grasping the objective moral order, whilst the moral order would not come to much if such a tendency were not in play.

3. Potential Objections

Let me, at this point, consider some of the most obvious objections to this position that I am taking. Within economics especially, the loudest objection is likely to emanate from the subjectivist camp. This, I believe, includes most mainstream economists who take any kind of position on such matters. Here the standard claim is that the determining factors of all our decisions are mere preferences, mere 'personal value judgements', or some such, and that what seems desirable to one individual need not to another. In such quarters, the only relevant universal frequently formulated is that: human beings have preferences. What the preferences are will vary from person to person, and possibly with any given person over time. From this perspective it is argued that economists and other scientists should desist from making normative claims at all. Certainly, there is a rejection of the idea of shared moral objectives.

Clearly we can all make individual assessments (there is a range of views) as to how resources might be allocated, etc. This augers for a democratic forum in decision making. But accepting this is quite consistent with allowing the existence of objective needs, perhaps to be revealed/clarified through the process of science. Those who argue that value judgements are purely subjective are effectively denying the existence of real needs. That real needs exist is then an empirical issue and, as above, it is easy enough to show that the views of the subjectivists on these matters are wrong. But actually, it is usually possible to demonstrate that the subjectivists know this in effect already, that even as they deny the fact of an objective morality, they are actually presupposing it themselves. Let me briefly elaborate.

Consider, as an obvious and prominent example of advocacy of the view in question, those who perpetuate the standard economics text book distinction between positive and normative economics, along with their usual assessment that factual and normative discourses belong in different realms. A typical formulation is provided by Begg, Fisher and Dornbush (1997):

"In studying economics it is important to distinguish positive and normative economics. Positive economics deals with objective or scientific explanations of the working of the economy. Normative economics is very different. Normative economics offers recommendations based on personal value judgements. In positive economics, we hope to act as detached scientists. Whatever our political persuasion, whatever our view about what we would regard as a 'good thing', in the first instance we have to be concerned with how the
world actually works. At this stage, there is no scope for personal value judgements. We are concerned with propositions of the form: if this is changed then that will happen. In this regard, positive economics is similar to the natural sciences such as physics, geology or astronomy. 

Scrupulous economists clearly distinguish their role as an expert adviser on positive economics from their status merely as involved private citizens in arguing for particular normative choices (Begg, Fischer and Dornbush, 1997, *Economics*, p. 10).

Consider first the assessment (it is immaterial for the moment whether this assessment is correct) that economists have expertise only in positive economics, so that, when it comes to normative choices, economists should merely take their place alongside all other ‘private citizens’. At the very least, Begg, Fischer and Dornbush are revealing here that they value human autonomy, they are recognising a common need for each ‘private citizen’ to have a say in her or his own destiny --even if many people prefer not to do so. They are committing themselves to a generalist position on human needs, interests and rights, with numerous consequences being drawn, even as they are wanting to deny it.

Notice too that in agreeing to engage in human discourse, a commitment to truth and consistency is being implicitly accepted; the value premise ‘truth is good’ is a prerequisite for any discussion, argument or recommendation. Thus even when the positivistic advisor attempts to restrict her or his recommendations to conditional claims of the form: ‘if you want Y do X, or ‘if this is changed then that will happen’, he or she is committing herself or himself to truth and consistency. He or she is saying that it is true that ‘if you want Y do X’, or ‘if this is changed then that will happen’. In consequence, the advisor is suggesting that any claims that contradict the one formulated are false; and he or she is necessarily, if implicitly, criticising them as such. In turn, he or she is necessarily implying a negative evaluation of all actions based on any conflicting claims or advice.

Consider Begg, Fisher and Dornbush’s own assessment. Nominally they appear to be putting forward a descriptive claim about a distinction between positive and normative economics. But in so doing they are simultaneously, if implicitly, asserting that those who do not recognise this distinction are in error. It is noticeable that those accepting the distinction in question come to be described as ‘scrupulous’, so that by implication those who do not must be viewed as less than scrupulous. Normative evaluations are evident. These authors are merely in error in recommending that factual and value discourses should be kept distinct. They are committing a performative contradiction, indicating how economists ought to behave (to be classified as scrupulous) at precisely the moment of appearing merely to be factual in describing the normative-positive distinction.

Further still, these authors are implicitly saying ‘trust us, act on what we are telling you, we would in your situation’. Thus they are showing solidarity with those they are addressing. In doing so they are ultimately committing themselves to, they are accepting the desirability of, a society based on trust and fraternity.

They are also committing themselves to a logic of consistency: ‘we should all behave in this way’. They are in effect recognising the possibility of normative claims that can be universalised across all of us. Once we consider the form of consistency that can be sustained, i.e., universalised across others, it can be seen that the eudemonic society is presupposed.

As a second example, consider the position of Hayek, perhaps economics’ most ardent proponent of a merely subjectivist approach to morality. Hayek, as is well known, frequently resists explicitly the conclusion that morals can be critically assessed. He recognises that critical assessments of morality are legitimate only if (as of course I am indeed maintaining is the case) there exist objective values to uncover, i.e., if (which Hayek denies) existing moral claims are fallible and transformable claims about an objective moral order or intransitive realm. Hayek, lacking (or dismissing) the concept of objective needs, believes that no moral position can be rationally justified. Statements like the following are familiar:

"Moreover, while it is true that traditional morals, etc., are not rationally justifiable, this is also true of any possible moral code, including any that socialists might ever be able to come up with. Hence no matter what rules we follow, we will not be able to justify them as demanded; so no argument about morals...can legitimately turn on the issue of justification. If we stopped doing everything for which we do not know the reason, for which we cannot provide a justification in the sense demanded, we would probably very soon be dead" (Hayek, 1988, p. 68)

But even this seems to invoke moral claims as correct. The form of Hayek’s argument suggests that he accepts that becoming dead sooner rather than later is bad, that the practice of attempting to justify each procedure, etc., before
acting on it will soon lead to our deaths, and therefore that to decline the attempt to justify all action is (morally) correct.

In any case, a few paragraphs further on Hayek explicitly allows the possibility of improving our moral traditions. He writes:

"While our moral traditions cannot be constructed, justified or demonstrated in the way demanded, their process of formation can be partially reconstructed, and in doing so we can to some degree understand the needs they serve. To the extent we succeed in this, we are indeed called upon to improve and revise our moral traditions by remedying recognisable defects by piecemeal improvements based on immanent criticism" (Hayek, 1988, p. 69).

It is difficult to see how Hayek can take this position without accepting that it is good that the needs in question (however much Hayek may wish to subjectivise them) are served, as must be the practices actually serving them. Once this is granted, we need only establish that objective needs exist whether or not fully known, and it is a small step to allowing that needs not already, or not very well served, should also be served, and that it is objectively morally good ceteris paribus that we transform or instigate practices to achieve this. And to become oriented to the needs of some, is, given the way we are, to become oriented to the needs of all.

Of course, I consider here only standard opponents to the view that I am defending, and demonstrate that they too ultimately presuppose it. But the view in question is also an explanatorily powerful theory in its own right. How else could we so well explain the continued involvement of so many people in progressive (socialist, feminist, green, anti-racist, etc.) movements wherein the few (relatively speaking) act on behalf of the many; projects like (U.K.) red-nose day/comic relief; countless charities; and other examples of the apparently selfless devotion of those involved to causes regarded as common to many or all? Indeed, is it not quite remarkable, and significant, how so many people so regularly act on behalf of others geographically, culturally and even inter-temporally (future generations) removed from themselves, as a result of recognising or anticipating constraints upon their ability to survive and flourish.

In making reference to these sorts of contributions, of course, it is necessary here neither to endorse nor to criticise all the precise forms of affiliative or supportive or solidaristic actions to make my point. I claim, at this stage, only that the drive to help or solidarise with others for the common good is everywhere in evidence -- irrespective of whether or not we are always, especially initially, wise or far-sighted in formulating our particular strategies, and even allowing that in many circumstances countervailing actions sometimes come to dominate.

I am suggesting, then, that the tendency to act in harmony with our being, to bring about conditions for the flourishing of each and all, is present everywhere -- most obviously in those directly advancing or supporting projects of help for, and solidarity with, others, but also in the actions of all of us, including those who would deny any objectivity to human needs and so morality, even as they formulate their denials.

In truth I am not sure that much of this is really contentious. Is it not clearly the case for most of us most of the time that when we recognise ills, or constraints on human flourishing -- such as ill-health, poverty, involuntary unemployment, discrimination, war, exploitation, alienation, oppression, hysteria, boredom, lack of reliability, misplaced trust/mistrust, pathological and other violence, marginalisation, wasted resources, underdeveloped competencies, unfulfilled potentials, frustration, inequalities in opportunities, liabilities and obligations, etc. -- we are each of us inclined ceteris paribus to evaluate them negatively, and ceteris paribus are moved positively to evaluate actions which are designed with the intent of absenting them. As Martha Nussbaum at one point puts it "It is the gap between potential humanness and its full realisation that exerts a moral claim" (Nussbaum, 1995, p.89).

III. The Ceteris Paribus Qualification and Practical Judgements

It is time to redeem the promise to examine the effect of the repeated use of the ceteris paribus qualifier. I started by denying that a philosophical project like critical realism should be associated with substantive claims and concrete policy orientations. At a relatively high level of abstraction, though, certain conclusions relating to matters of ethics have been sustained. By way of reasoning from generalised features of experience to a conception of the human being as complexly structured, socially situated and needy, a definite moral orientation is achieved.
Basically, anything preventing the attainment of human needs and flourishing, is a constraint or an ill and bad, and measures designed to absent such constraints, especially those clearly consistent with the conception of the good society, can be accepted as morally good ceteris paribus. The question here is what difference does the repeated use of the ceteris paribus qualifier make. It may with reason be conjectured that its use will forestall the drawing of definite inferences for practice. It is this issue I consider here.

### 1. The Openness of the Social System

I noted at the outset that it is an insight of critical realist social theorising, one now widely recognised, that the world, both natural and social, is an open system. By this, let me repeat, I mean that event regularities are not ubiquitous. Rather they are found mostly to occur when stable underlying mechanisms are insulated and thereby empirically identified. The production of an event regularity in this fashion is precisely the purpose (and achievement) of much well-controlled experimentation. Thus objects (are successfully made to) fall in the experimental vacuum with a constant rates of acceleration. Outside the experiment falling objects do not necessarily keep to such a pattern because of countervailing causal factors. Autumn leaves or metal balls will fall (or perhaps even rise) at rate determined in part by other conditions, including aerodynamic, thermal or magnetic mechanisms or even physical objects that get in the way.

The category tendency captures the notion of a mechanism that is in play and having its effects whatever the actual outcome. Tendencies do not operate actualistically (in an open system of countervailing forces) nor counter-factually but transfactually. Thus statements about gravitational tendencies do not tell us, for an open system with countervailing forces, what will be manifest at the level of events. Nor do they indicate what would happen merely in a vacuum. Rather they express a force in play and having its effects whatever the actual outcome. The gravitational tendency operates on the leaf not only if it is dropped in a vacuum but even as it flies over roof tops and chimneys. And if Marx is correct there is a tendency for profits to fall even as and when (because of countervailing tendencies) profits actually rise.

If, then, we say that a certain object, if dropped, will fall with a constant rate of acceleration ceteris paribus, the latter qualifier is attached as a way of acknowledging that the context is (or may be) an open system. We must thus recognise that whilst use of the ceteris paribus in this fashion may be not be improper, in an open system of transfactual tendencies it conveys only part of the story if read literally. For whether or not the ceteris paribus condition is satisfied (and in the social realm especially it may rarely be the case that it is) transfactual tendencies, if triggered, will be continuously in operation none the less.

However the ceteris paribus clause can indicate the full extent of the situation, but precisely if, and only if, taken as signalling that the world may be open and that a transfactual tendency is in play.

This sort of reasoning carries over to the ethical realm. For to say that an action, such as removing a constraint on well-being is good ceteris paribus - say transforming in a remedial fashion mechanisms that generate falsehood - is to indicate that it is morally good ceteris paribus. In an open world, normative injunctions of this sort - let is refer to them as abstract practical judgements - carry transfactual force. Thus just as what actually happens in open systems is determined by a multiplicity of causes, what is to be done in them - the concrete practical judgement - is determined by a multiplicity of evaluative and other, including circumstantial, considerations. But the moral standing of an objective is no more undermined by the applicability, in a given context, of countervailing or reinforcing values than gravity is undermined by the observation that, with countervailing forces also in operation, autumn leaves often flutter in the breeze. And just because the specific conditions of actions of normative interest rarely repeat themselves it does not follow that the same normative principles cannot be at work in many of them. (Notice that herein lies a basis for reconciling de-ontological and consequentialist positions in ethics).

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6 Notice, incidently, that just as a given mechanism (gravity) may partake in a range of different events (planetary motion, falling leaves, flying leaves) and the same kind of event (flying leaves) may be the result of a plurality of causes (aerodynamic, thermal and gravitational mechanisms or tendencies), so the same value or goal (eg, equality of opportunity) may be manifest in a plurality of acts (creating democratic forums, removing discriminatory legislation) just as the same act (combating racial prejudice) may satisfy a plurality of possible values (equality, honesty, trust, respect for others).

The conclusion that a unique normative injunction at the level of practical action can only rarely if ever be determined is, then, a result of the openness, diversity and context dependency of action-situations. But it does not follow that the same normative claims may not be at work in many of them.
2. Concrete Practical Judgments

Moral claims, then, exert their force transfactually. This is what is meant by saying that any actions implicated in them should be supported transfactually. Normative claims will necessarily combine with other normative and circumstantial considerations in determining any concrete practical judgement of what is to be done in the particular circumstances that actually prevail. What more can be said? I have earlier suggested that it is important that conceptions of the good society, of where we hope to get to, do, as far as possible, influence the manner in which we move in that direction. I have argued that, in determining which of a range of possible actions to take, we ought to engage, where possible, in exercises of concrete utopianism, thinking in terms of possibilities or scenarios that appear desirable and consistent with our understanding of human social and technological, etc., potentials, as well as ideas about the transition.

I hasten to add that the concrete utopian imagination is in no way a prescription for the future. The good society can only be an open one in which it is up to the totality of concretely singularised individuals to determine what is to be done. There is a difference between emancipatory and emancipated action, even if it is desirable that the values informing the former are developmentally consistent with the morality of the latter. I thus feel bound to repeat yet once more that the concrete judgemental exercise necessarily entails a (revisable) conception of human nature. And, of course, the evolutionary openness of human nature itself entails that any objective morality too is open. Obviously the human capacity for wisdom will greatly benefit the process. And in this exercise much speculation is inevitable. But as I have previously indicated, it is difficult to imagine that any sustainable end state or process of such morally informed concrete practical judgements could be other than a society in which the free flourishing of each is a condition of the free flourishing of all.

Such considerations then can come into play in the determination of any concrete practical judgement for action. I should, finally, note, however, that even the emergence of the practical axiological judgement does not by any means guarantee its realisation. Of course any agent is always acting in some fashion. Thus normative reasoning of the sort in question, if carried through, will condition action in some way. But if, and presumably only if, conditions allow that the concrete practical judgement can be realised, that the agent is able to exercise the necessary powers for it, and does not suffer from a lack of will power, the action prescribed, assuming it is also sincerely wanted will be ushered in. Of course, things can change or be confused, and conflicting wants can be in play. The concrete practical judgement, thus conditions the presumption only of a disposition or orientation in the direction of action. In this sense explanatory critique is only conditioned critique.

IV. Trust, Cooperation and Competition

I arrive at the point when I can examine the sorts of implications that the sort of social theory I defend bears regarding processes of trust, cooperation and competition. In assessing the desirability of such factors as these the relevant criterion in each case, I am suggesting, is whether they human survival and well being are facilitated. Let me start with trust. Trust, of course, is bound up with trustworthiness or reliability. To trust in the untrustworthy can be harmful of course. But trust is often a condition for the production/reproduction of trustworthiness in others. And it seems that generalised human flourishing requires the proliferation of both trustworthiness and (where appropriate) trust.

Simply put: we need to trust others and we need others to trust ourselves -- for the good of all. We live amongst, affect, and depend upon, others. In this, from birth onwards, we necessarily trust and value trustworthiness in others. These value commitments are essential to our possibility of flourishing. Think, for example, of how we depend on the testament of others in buying goods, using data, motoring, getting directions, or just in reading the newspaper or watching the television. Think of how we trust taxi-drivers, all aspects of air-travel provision, doctors, our children's teachers etc., etc.

But think too of how we need others to trust us if we are to take up responsible positions as parents, teachers, doctors, taxi-drivers, team players, group musicians, close friends, professional advisors, etc.

Just to speak is to say "trust me: this is what is the case, or this is what I would do in your circumstances".
To say to others "it is raining", "take an aspirin for your headache" or even "positive and normative discourse should be kept separate" is to say "trust me, act on what I say, I would do so in your situation" or just "trust me, in your position this is what I would do". To utter any remark, implying at some level "trust me act on this, I would in your situation" is to reveal solidarity with others as a value commitment. If true to oneself, this commitment to, or solidarity with, others implies evaluating constraints on their needs or well-being negatively, ceteris paribus, and being prepared ceteris paribus to act to absent them. Trust and trustworthiness is inherently bound up with human survival and flourishing².

What of competition and cooperation? It is common for those interested in the progressive transformation of human societies to emphasise cooperation in preference to competition. Certainly it seems prima facie plausible that cooperation is essential (though not of course sufficient) to human well-being, and that the removal of constraints on its attainment is desirable ceteris paribus. Of course, there are times when cooperating with those

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7 The preceding comments apply for the various interpretations of the term trust commonly found or implied. It may be worth noting here, however, that indeed there are various different conceptions to be found. In truth the conceptualisation of trust in the literature is often surrounded by ambiguity and tension. Let me briefly formalise a few conceptions that seem rather prominent if usually left implicit.

1Trust as belief: belief in the reliability of a thing, person or system, regarding certain (unknown) outcomes or courses of action, where reliability may relate to a thing's or person's integrity, competence, or correctness, etc., depending on the context.

2Trust as reliance: reliance upon a thing, person or system, regarding certain (unknown) outcomes courses of action, where the object of reliance may be a thing's or person's integrity, competence, or correctness, etc., depending on the context.

3Trust as disposition: an intrinsic tendency or liability to rely upon another thing, person or system, regarding certain (unknown) outcomes courses of action, where the object of reliance may be a thing's or person's integrity, competence, or correctness, etc., depending on the context.

4Trust as object of belief: reliable (features of) things, people or systems.

The coexistence of 1 and 2 is in ordinary English language explains the familiarity of such contrasting expressions as "I would trust X to do the job but I prefer to do it myself" and "I have to rely on X to do the job even though I do not really trust her/him". The coexistence of 1-4 in the economics literature explain many of the contrasting assessments as are found.

If trust is multi-faceted so, at some level, must be our analysis of it. Clearly trust as belief can be treated in the same way as belief in general. If person or group B trusts in (the reliability of) object O which is inherently unreliable, and S is a mechanism causing B (erroneously) to trust/believe in the reliability of O, then we pass to a negative evaluation towards S ceteris paribus, and a positive evaluation of practices designed to absent S ceteris paribus. Reliability or trustworthiness (of others, machines, food, air, dictionaries, judgement, etc.,) does seem to be a condition of human well-being. Thus practices designed to remove constraints on its attainment are good ceteris paribus. Trust as reliance is a condition of human well-being just when the objects of reliance are reliable. Trust as reliance per se does not presuppose such conditions are satisfied. We may, and often do, have to rely on something we are quite uncertain about. But the more we can depend with good reason on trust as reliance the greater our scope of action, and so well being. Thus, if to repeat the argument of the main text, if we can trust/rely on the labels on food packets, medicines, reports in newspapers, academic journals, data collected by official bodies, etc., our scope of action is expanded. In a situation where we need to check out everything ourselves we are constrained in our options indeed. Trust as reliance, and a situation in which trust is warranted, are essential then for human well-being. Good actions then are those ceteris paribus that remove constraints both on reliability and on trust in appropriate conditions.

Often the two, reliability and trust, will, as I note above, develop together, and will remain conditions of each other. This is the case especially with social relationships, between friends, or partners, or academics, between (representatives of) firms, or even nations. In a situation where the two, reliability and trust, develop together, it is not uncommon to think of trust itself either as a social relation, or perhaps as the climate of expectation (of reliability) that is engendered. This is trust as object of belief. In a community where it prevails, of course, members may be apt to develop trust as a disposition.

Notice that in such situations where trust is itself a condition as well as consequence of reliability, wherein we thus have a duality of trust, then trust as reliance becomes itself a morally good practice ceteris paribus.
wishing to harm others will not be desirable. But cooperation does seem an essential condition for generalised human flourishing, whereas the value of competition is likely to be more sensitive to context.

Some commentators, though, particularly those enamoured of the market mechanism, question this assessment; instead they extol the supposed relative virtues of competition. For such contributors, it is conjectured that human flourishing is better facilitated by an economic system based on competition. An example is provided by an end of career contribution of Hayek (1988):

"One revealing mark of how poorly the ordering principle of the market is understood is the common notion that 'cooperation is better than competition'. Cooperation, like solidarity, presupposes a large measure of agreement on ends as well as on methods employed in their pursuit. It makes sense in a small group whose members share particular habits, knowledge and beliefs about possibilities. It makes hardly any sense when the problem is to adapt to unknown circumstances; yet it is this adaption to the unknown on which the coordination of efforts in the extended order rests. Competition is a procedure of discovery, a procedure involved in all evolution, that led man unwittingly to respond to novel situations; and through further competition, not through agreement, we gradually increase our efficiency.

To operate beneficially, competition requires that those involved observe rules rather than resort to physical force. Rules alone can unite an extended order. (Common ends can do so only during a temporary emergency that creates a common danger for all. The "moral equivalent of war" offered to evoke solidarity is but a relapse into cruder principles of coordination)" (Hayek, 1988, p. 19).

In large part Hayek is suggesting that cooperation is not only less useful than competition in some relevant sense, but also, in view of its very nature, and like solidarity, bound to fail in general just because there is no basis for shared agreement on ends.

This, however, is a position merely assumed rather than investigated. It reflects Hayek's early belief that when certain economists (those which he labels "objectivist") make their "frequent statements about the objective needs of the people, .[the term] objective is merely a name for somebody's views about what the people ought to want" (1942-44, p. 92). For Hayek, subjective wants or preferences are all there is and the individual is better informed as to what his or her wants happen to be.

Once we give proper attention to the nature of human being, however, we can see that this seemingly common sense (subjectivist) perception is actually beside the point. Whatever their momentary manifest wants, human beings do also have real shared needs and interests, needs indeed that may be out of phase with many wants. From this perspective the possibility of a eudemonistic society based on the (possibly gradual) removal of constraints on solidaristic behaviour cannot be ruled out a priori. Hayek's example of war, in particular the uniting of a people when their society is under attack from would-be-controlling invaders, indicates not merely a moment of coming together of preferences (of different people), but a harmonising of preferences with real needs and interests. It is a moment of recognising that common needs and interests exist.

Of course, the degree to which we have shared needs, etc., can only be determined ex posteriory, especially though the empirical and critical methods of science. There is no presumption in this that the findings of science be acted upon merely by scientists, of course, or indeed by people situated in positions of government. Indeed, there is every reason to suppose that critical reasoning activity can reveal the sorts of conditions that best facilitate the allocation of resources in a society oriented to the well-being of the one and all.

In part, though, Hayek is making a relative claim. He is suggesting that action itself is, in most situations, better carried out on a competitive rather than cooperative basis. Here, it is assumed without argument that cooperation and competition are mutually exclusive. But in truth competition regularly goes hand in hand with cooperation⁸. This is obviously the case in activities like games. But it is really no different in the market place. Cooperation prevails at all levels. Representatives of firms cooperate in following national and regional rules. Within firms cooperation is essential for anything to be achieved. Marx expresses the latter insight well:

"A single violin player is his own conductor; an orchestra requires a separate one. The work of directing, superintending and adjusting becomes one of the functions of capital, from the moment the labour comes under the control of capital [and] becomes cooperative" (Marx, 1974, p.313).

⁸ As Hayek himself seems to recognise on other occasions (e.g., Hayek, 1960, p. 37).
So what do we conclude about the moral correctness of activities based on, or which promote, competition or cooperation? This will always depend on context. But as I note above, I suspect cooperative behaviour is essential to a society of human flourishing and so should be encouraged wherever feasible and not obviously harmful. But equally, competition, in some contexts, may also be essential to realising human welfare. For example, an absence of competition may well lead to a constraint on our fulfilling our physical and mental capacities, on our discovering technologies that can relieve human suffering, that can facilitate human well-being. In which case removing constraints on competition itself can be regarded as a good, ceteris paribus. The latter qualification must be added to rule out cases wherein competition works to impede human emancipation. Certainly, I do not think competition can be ruled in all cases out on moral grounds a priori.

V. Illustration

At this point an illustration of the overall position developed, with some comment on the place of trust, cooperation and competition, is probably warranted. For this I focus upon an example of a not insignificant constraint on human flourishing. The case I choose, as on various other occasions, is the project of modern mainstream economics.

By modern mainstream economics I mean, as always, the formalistic modelling project in economics. Now there is little doubt that this project (encompassing micro, macro and econometric modelling) is in a state of disarray. As I have shown elsewhere (e.g., Lawson, 1997) not only does it fail on its own terms (it is both explanatorily and predictively unsuccessful) it is riven with theory practice inconsistencies. Such failings are acknowledged even by the more reflective members of the mainstream project itself, many of whom admit that they do not know where that project is going (see for example, Leontief, 1982, p. 104; Leamer, 1978, p. vi; Rubinstein, 1995, p.12).

As I have also argued over and again the disarray of this project is not accidental, it follows necessarily from its essential, more or less defining, objective: to mathematically formalise the study of social phenomena. With that latter phenomenon generated in an open system, and the sorts of deductivist formalism wielded in economics presupposing a ubiquity of closed systems, the ensuing mismatch of method and object accounts for all the various failures, tensions, incoherencies and compromise formulations.

This mismatch accounts for the failures of the discipline as I have noted on various occasions. But it also unhappily conditions the anti-intellectual displays that are also to be found. Because of its manifest failures at the level of practice this mainstream project is necessarily riven with compromise formulations, theory/practice inconsistencies, internal strife and insecurity. These outcomes, in turn, results in numerous pathological tendencies, including the suppression of criticism, the imposition of constraints on what can be taught or published in journals regarded as prestigious, severe controls on the sort of viewpoints admitted and promoted within the economics academy, and indeed a limitation on intellectual openness and honesty generally.

As I would argue that the major constraint on a fruitful and useful economics at this moment in time is the dogmatic refusal of those in the mainstream to subject their ideas to intellectual competition. In the face of increasing criticism on the part of students and other `customers' in the limited relevance of formalistic modelling exercises, the near universal reaction of modellers themselves has been to reinterpret formalistic (micro, macro and econometric) modelling, as core, and so compulsory, material, and allow alternative ideas to appear as at best peripheral and poorly credited options.

In various ways, then, we have here a serious cognitive ill, a malaise that affects not only protagonists of the project (and other economists). Arguably a thriving and successful (revelatory and explanatorily powerful) economics is a necessary element in providing for the needs of humanity widely. So the disarray and failures of the modern discipline, or at least of its hugely dominant mainstream project, is a constraint, an ill, that urgently requires absenting.

\footnote{There is little question that formalistic modelling is the characteristic feature of modern mainstream project in economics. See especially Strassmann's (1994, p. 154) illuminating assessment.}
We clearly ought, then, to pass a negative evaluation of this project and lend support *ceteris paribus* to alternatives that seek to transcend it. It is at this stage that we need to enter into an exercise in concrete utopianism, taking into account where we are, whether it is feasible to absent the problem, how to do it remaining true to ourselves and others, while acting in a manner that is developmentally consistent with the (moral) objective(s) we are actively pursuing, and so forth.

It is clear that the cause of the failings of the project in question is that it oriented to formalism primarily. A major part of this solution then is to change this emphasis, to reorient the discipline so that the goal of social illumination dominates. At the level of theory we need to adopt an approach that recognises (at least the possibility) that the world is open, that formalism may not be everything and that ontology can matter.

In addition, however, we need strategies that both acknowledge our individual concrete needs and presage, or are developmentally consistent with, the sort of social conditions we wish to usher in. This I think means encouraging *competition* in ideas. It also means *cooperating* with others in doing so. Indeed, it involves acting in a *trustworthy* way throughout any research and teaching exercise.

Now it is apparent that such remedial forms of action are not only warranted, but already operative; an impulse to transforming the situation is, not surprisingly, already in action. It is in this light that we must understand and appreciate both the theoretical bases of heterodox projects in economics -- such as Austrianism, feminist economics, (old) institutionalism, post Keynesianism, Marxian economics -- as well as the free flowing eclecticism that is found within them.

The latter eclecticism, or anyway diversity, at least as a possibility, is essential. For it is the case that economics ought really to be not only more relevant but also prosecuted in a fashion that allows both the peaceful coexistence and cooperation of projects and the encouragement of ideas that at some level are also in competition. Isolated economists critical of the mainstream need, at the very least, an `umbrella organisation' or open forum in which to meet others, exchange ideas, and develop a sense of relevance in collective identity. Respecting views and developments with whose accuracy we may not (yet) agree is surely a condition of the academic community consistent with a free flourishing society.

Although, as I say, the heterodox traditions mostly already practice morally good conduct of this sort to a significant degree, I think I would especially single out feminist economics in this regard. It is necessary only to read Diana Strassmann's opening editorial of the first edition of *Feminist Economics* to appreciate the commitment in intent in this project to these human cooperative and intellectual values. Here we find a determined attempt to open the gates to all, to facilitate open, honest cooperative academic enquiry in line with a concrete utopian image of the ideal academic community. 10

Of course, even here we can only expect developmental consistency. Even as specific actions facilitate certain previously marginalised groups entering the discussion, others may yet (or even thereby) be (unintentionally)

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10 The latter is worth quoting from at length:

"In founding *Feminist Economics* our intent is to enable new and important economic conversations to flourish....

....*Feminist Economics* will welcome contributions from diverse scholars, particularly those who have been previously excluded or under represented in economics conversations. These include scholars from countries in the South and persons of colour as well as scholars from other disciplines and intellectual traditions....

....As the gates of this [Journal] and other economic forums are opened up to variously situated participants, current understandings of what counts as feminist and what counts as economics may change. New theories, some perhaps not even imaginable to current participants, may emerge as part of a new and more feminist economics.

Our different histories of privilege and exclusion, of culture and ethnicity, require that we keep the boundaries of the forum flexible. Insofar as economic knowledge is affected by its grounding in the lives of its producers, we must recognise that our own views are situated and partial as well, and that any effort to define feminist economics at this moment would give disproportionate voice to those currently able to participate in these conversations. So long as the processes which select and train future economists prevent people with certain experiential and social positions from participating in economic conversations, we must keep in mind that most critical of feminist insights: the relationship between power and knowledge. We who are privileged as current participants in these debates must take care not to abuse our own power" (Strassmann, 1995, pp. 1-2)
constrained in some way. This was the initial experience of the feminist project more widely of course. Thirty years ago or so, feminist theorists began increasingly to emphasise the partiality of all knowledge, and to criticise the tendency of (typically white and male) scientists to presume their views to be uninfluenced by local biases, personal histories and values. The dominant message of these feminists was that by drawing attention to gendered locations a fuller vision of reality could be uncovered.

While this message doubtless was, and remains, correct, these feminists were subsequently criticised for treating the gender relationship, and the consequent gendered differentiation of social positions, as universalising of social relations and differences. Specifically, feminist theorising was criticised for marginalising differences of race, ethnocentrism, culture, age and so forth; women of colour, lesbians and others found their history and culture ignored in the ongoing discussions relating to gender.

The reaction, though, was a fairly swift and radical transformation in even enlightened feminist thinking, one that was as empowering politically as it was illuminating. The response of feminists theorists to the criticisms of those who felt excluded by the prevailing discussions of gender was to listen, to seek to learn more about one's own prejudices, biases and limitations of perspectives. The rhetoric of humility has become dominant as feminists practise, as well as theorise the virtue of, being attentive to others' experiences, perspectives and needs. As a result feminists have been strategic in successfully facilitating a stage -- both inside and outside the academy - for otherwise marginalised or excluded voices, a contribution that has both emancipatory and enlightening dimensions (see e.g. Bordo, 1993; Lawson 1999).

This experience, I think, indicates why developmental consistency is the only meaningful or operative criterion of consistency here, and the nature of transformative practice as we can conceive it. Obviously, within economics, as outside it, there is much to do, a long way to travel, and many difficult concrete problems or dilemmas to grapple with. But in modern economics at least, I do think the stimulus for change is, and can be seen to be, already under way.

Of course, as I have argued throughout, such an impulse to progressive change and development can bear upon actual practice in many different ways according to context. An isolated individual, for example, may both accept the sort of explanatory critique of the mainstream project described here as well as the need to absent the latter project, and in addition judge that, as a practical matter, it is desirable to combine explicitly with some heterodox project, or some such, and actively oppose openly the mainstream projects various constraining aspects - and yet still not do so. This may be because of an effort of will, short term costs, or whatever.

All that can be said is that in such a situation there is at least an impulse to relevant action. This may lead to dissonance. It may even lead the individual to a move out of economics into, say, human geography, sociology, business or human resource management, or some other discipline, where projects of relevance can be prosecuted more openly. The latter course of action, indeed, seems to represent a trend currently amongst teachers and students alike. But this is all consistent with there being some affect, with a tendency to progress being in play.

VI. Conclusion

I have argued that despite is philosophical orientation a project such as critical realism does have implications at the level of ethical matters. These though will be highly abstract and mostly concerned with possibilities. In terms of factors such as trust, cooperation and competition the argument is clearly that these can be considered good to the extent they facilitate human well-being and flourishing. Whether or not they do, and so can be supported, will depend on the context of their operation. Although trust and cooperation seem be fairly general conditions of human flourishing the question of the desirability of competition is likely to be far more sensitive to the prevailing conditions.

References


