CRITICAL INTERPRETIVISM: THE FIRST OUTLINE

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Introduction

"… there's nothing more dangerous
than a man who knows what 'right' is."
Commodus (Gladiator)

This paper is the first result of nearly two decades of speculation about a sound philosophical framing of my research. I have always broadly positioned myself as an Interpretivist, but not of the sort that goes so far as to say that 'if nobody has heard a tree falling then it did not make a sound'. Instead, I would say that we cannot know for sure, but we could assume that it did. Some Critical Realists (CR), including Roy Bhaskar, suggested that I should become (or brand myself) a Critical Realist. Indeed, what I do in my research in the philosophical-methodological sense is typically acceptable to CR. However, I have two significant problems with CR, both stemming from the underlying objectivist ontological position: (1) I do not believe that all relationships are necessarily *causal*. I do believe, that there are causal relationships, but also that there can be other kinds of relationships. (2) I do not believe that all processes are necessarily deterministic, therefore I dislike the term *mechanism*, which alludes to the exclusivity of mechanistic processes. Sure, some processes are mechanistic, but maybe not all. I have also felt uneasy about the idea of Absolute Truth, and of Science as The Way to this Absolute Truth. Little by little, an idea started to take shape in my mind: I decided to try to do to interpretivism something similar to what Roy Bhaskar did to positivism – create a critical variant of it.

Ontological considerations

In this section, I want to dig deeper around whether the proverbial falling tree in the forest made noise if no one was there to hear it. It is far too easy to get to the extreme Relativist position, which is on the opposite polarity from the Absolute Truth. Let me first note that the typical contrasting of Relativism with Realism. The opposite of Real is Imaginary, and the

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opposite of Relative is Absolute. In ethics Moral Absolutism is often contrasted to Moral Relativism, for instance, is lying always wrong, or it can be the right thing to do under some circumstances. However, the original contrast stems from metaphysics: is the world objectively given or it subjectively depends on who is experiencing it? To cope with the problem of subjective experience, and with the dilemma of the sound of the falling tree, Bhaskar (1997) "stratified" reality. At the core is *the real*, in which objectively given, mechanisms are, but supposedly we cannot access these mechanisms. Above *the real*, and closer to us, is *the actual*, in which phenomena happen; this level is, by definition, still inaccessible to us. We can access only the third layer, *the empirical*, in which we may or may not experience the phenomena that happen in the *actual*, caused by the mechanisms in the *real*. This provides a resolution of the falling tree problem, i.e. the falling tree either does or does not make noise in *the actual*, regardless whether we experience it in *the empirical*.

However, I find this explanation less than satisfactory, even though, my initial comment that 'we cannot know for sure, but we can assume that it did', works here. Trying to find the origins of the falling tree example, I ended up with René Descartes (1637), who made the initial distinction between primary and secondary qualities, which was further elaborated by John Locke (1690) and George Berkeley (1878). The essence of the argument is that *primary qualities* characterize the objects themselves, while *secondary qualities* emerge in someone experiencing the object. With regards to the falling tree, for example, the shape of the tree is a primary quality, while the sound is a secondary quality. So, the falling tree could have created the soundwaves by disturbing the air around; however, if there was nobody perceiving these sound waves before they fade away, then the felt sense of the sound did not happen. In this sense, the falling tree did not make a sound-as-a-felt-sense, if nobody heard it, although it could have made the soundwaves that would have caused the felt sense of sound, if there was someone to hear it. With this example on mind, I go back to the ontological considerations of Critical Interpretivism (CI).

I start with an extreme relativist ontological claim, that every experience is individual, and the world depends on us experiencing it. This also means that everyone's perception is equally valid. For example, if I like wine and my friend prefers beer, it is futile to debate whether wine is better than beer. I can understand and accept that my friend's taste differs from mine. But if I want an opinion about a particular wine, I am more interested to hear what a master-sommelier has to say than the opinion of my friend who only drinks beer.

So, although the world is relative to the *experiencer*, the experiencers are not the same in terms of expertise or ability to discern the nuances. Therefore, an extra layer is needed in order to reflect the 'mastery' of the experiencer. Hence, I call it a *pluralist layer*, taking on board the idea of pluralism as originally introduced by Isaiah Berlin (1969), which was further elaborated by José Ortega y Gasset (1932). The starting point is that every one of those relative experiences is necessarily a partial one, such as looking at a forest from a particular viewpoint. If we take many looks from a variety of viewpoints, we can get a fuller picture of reality. This approach puts a high emphasis on how educated one's experience is, based on which we can distinguish between more and less valuable takes on reality. Of course, we will also probably choose those takes on reality that are close to what we believe.

Finally, when the opinions of the players at the pluralist strata collide, they debate and, often after a very long time, they come to a consensus. There may still be more than one variant of the truth, but it will not be a very large number. Those who are close in their views, can negotiate a variant of reality that is acceptable for everyone involved (often through compromises). It is this 'reality' that ends up in the university textbooks. Typically, there are one or two depictions of reality that are acceptable in a discipline at a time, although we can very often follow how these views of reality have changed, as we understood it better and better.

The stratified reality in CI has *the relative* at its core, where everyone experiences the world. The next layer is *the pluralist* one, where views are significantly smaller in number and these views are expected to be highly educated. Finally, at *the negotiated* level, there are the accepted views, or several accepted views of reality – and this is as close as we can get to something that we could think of as objective or absolute.

Conclusion

This outline is an attempt to capture, spell out, and formalize the philosophical grounding of a number of research projects that I have conducted with various researchers, I call this philosophical framing Critical Interpretivism. I believe that other researchers may find it useful too. I strongly believe in the value of clearly articulating one's philosophical position, hence, I offer Critical Interpretivism for a discussion to the philosophically savvy management scholars of the PHILOS workshop. In the full version of the paper I will also discuss the relevant epistemological and axiological issues.

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