Critical Realism and Pragmatism in Educational Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper juxtaposes critical realism with the influential tradition of pragmatism in educational research. In the first part of this paper, I outline the nature and influence in education of a particular form of pragmatism called Naturalistic Coherentism (NC), and note some striking similarities with critical realism. In the second part, the pioneering work of David Corson in applying Bhaskar’s work to the field of educational research is examined, along with Corson’s mis-placed criticism of Naturalistic Coherentism. In the third part of the paper, I suggest that the dialecticalisation of CR provides tools which were not available to Corson at the time - namely the DCR tenets of absence and alethia - and that these two key tenets now allow a criticism of NC that reveals the irrealism of its pragmatist heritage.
1 Introduction: Situating Quinean Pragmatism in Education – the Work of Walker, Evers and Lakomski.

In the 1960s and 70s, the dominant form of epistemology in education was influenced by the tradition of “analytic philosophy of education” (APE). Corson (1990a) identifies APE with the “London School” of analytic philosophers of education, such as Hirst and Peters. However, during the 1970s a “new” sociology of education undermined the dominant influence of APE. Advocates of the “new” sociology of education - such as M. F. D. Young (1971) - criticised the traditional arrangements of educational systems effected by APE, claiming that curricular structures and the research paradigms used to evaluate them were tools used by those in power to perpetuate and develop “macro social arrangements and historical forces” (Corson, 1990a, p. 29).

Just as the deconstructive mission of the “new” sociology of education against APE was becoming influential in educational practice, it was undermined by a wave of “restructuring” in higher education, which came as part of a burgeoning global recession in the 1980s (Corson, 1990a, p. 29). In an environment of economic rationalisation and contraction, the “new” sociology was not popular either with those who held decision-making power in education, or with traditional analytic philosophers of education.

1.1 The Emergence of Naturalistic Coherentism

It was against this backdrop of a void left by an APE stripped of its hegemony, and a “new” sociology of education rendered impotent through economic rationalisation that the influential tradition of contemporary neo-pragmatism emerged. This tradition has been cited as the dominant academic approach in the last decades of the Twentieth century in the USA (Maddock 1994; Evers & Lakomski 1994b). Heavily influenced by the thought of W. V. O. Quine (1950), this tradition centres around the work of Walker and Evers (1983, 1984, 1986), and later Evers and Lakomski (1993, 1995, 1996, 2000). Walker and Evers developed a position which combined a Deweyan-based pragmatism with a Quinean holism to effectively critique traditional analysis in education, thus sustaining a valuable critique of APE through times of great change in the field of education.

Evers and Walker were concerned with exposing the APE distinction between analytic and synthetic statements as illusory. This in turn collapsed one of the main supports of the APE approach – the difference between conceptual points and empirical points. For Quine, the terms in theories only have meaning within those particular theories, and a decision about which “meaning” to adopt is a decision in the same order as a decision about which “theory” to adopt. As a result, attempts to generate a priori use of meanings are seen as artificial attempts to delimit the field of discourse. In contrast to the compartmentalisation of knowledge, Evers and Walker employ Quine’s theorising as a template for a holistic conception of educational knowledge.
Both widely-known and influential, this work has been variously termed “Australian naturalism” (Evers, 1993) “materialist pragmatism” (Walker & Evers, 1984), and more recently, “naturalistic coherentism” (Evers & Lakomski, 1994a). The main characteristics of the position have changed little since its emergence (a testament to its rigour) – and so for purposes of clarity and economy, and in deference to the author’s wish to use the latest term, this paper will use the term naturalistic coherentism (NC).

NC was developed by Walker and Evers in the early eighties, and continued by Evers and Lakomski through the nineties up until the present day, where its application has been mainly in the field of educational administration research. Other various projects of NC have included its application in curriculum theory and philosophy of education in general. These projects have been driven by a dissatisfaction with the influence of positivism and extreme relativism in educational research, a dissatisfaction that is held in common with critical realists. Evers and Lakomski (1991, p. 3) identify the legacy of positivism and extreme relativism as “logical empiricism” and “the paradigms approach” respectively.

1.2 Distinguishing Characteristics of NC

The pragmatist tendencies of NC stem from its association with Dewey. Walker, Evers and Lakomski identify with Dewey’s emphasis on problem solving and epistemological holism, but reject Dewey’s instrumentalism and theory of truth. Naturalistic coherentism also draws heavily on the holism of Quine, and his materialist version of “epistemology naturalised” (Walker, 1985, p. 56). Evers and Lakomski (1991, p. ix) also acknowledge the influence that P. M. Churchland (1985) and P. S. Churchland (1986) have had on their thinking “on all the big questions of realism, physicalism, reductionism, philosophy of mind, epistemology, and philosophy of science”.

Across a wide range of concepts, the similarities between CR and naturalistic coherentism are striking. The commonality of arguing against both positivism and extreme relativism is evident in the mission of Evers and Lakomski below, just as it is evident in the early part of Bhaskar’s project:

… we argued that the whole framework of debate between science and its critics was mistaken. The biggest mistake ironically involves an uncritical acceptance of positivist accounts of the nature of science – and then arguing that since positivism is plainly inadequate for various purposes, so too is science. Our strategy has been to detach science from positivism and argue the merits of a postpositivist view of science and its justification; one drawing on a coherentist and naturalistic view of knowledge.

(Evers & Lakomski, 2000, p. 3)

The commonalities between NC and CR are too numerous to examine in any detailed way in this paper. However, given (i) the similarities between NC and CR and, (ii) the strength of NC’s tradition in education, critical realists working in the field need to be prepared to acknowledge the possibility that the potential work of critical realism in education is already being covered by NC. As a result, this paper concentrates more on the differences between the two, rather than devoting itself to a detailed examination of the similarities between NC and CR. To this end, I have summarised the congruencies between CR and NC in the table below. Although a cursory
comparison will have to suffice at this stage, the presence of many key tenets of CR in the work of NC is not difficult to discern.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congruency</th>
<th>Naturalistic Coherentism</th>
<th>Critical Realism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stratified reality (implied only in NC)</td>
<td>Walker (1991, p. 512)</td>
<td>RTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolutionary-based reality</td>
<td>Walker &amp; Evers (1984, p. 29)</td>
<td>RTS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emergence (synchronic and diachronic)</td>
<td>Walker (1991, p. 509)</td>
<td>SRHE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scientific realism</td>
<td>Walker (1991, p. 514)</td>
<td>RTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social nature of knowledge</td>
<td>Walker (1985, p. 67)</td>
<td>RTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against positivism, inclusion of human values in science</td>
<td>Evers (1993, p. 41)</td>
<td>SRHE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of “superempirical” or pragmatic and evaluative aspects of theory-choice</td>
<td>Evers and Lakomski (1991, p. 42)</td>
<td>PON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemological relativism (CR); no foundations (NC) does not mean judgmental relativism (CR) or “debilitating relativism” (NC)</td>
<td>Walker (1985, p. 58; 1991, p. 507)</td>
<td>RTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons as causes (cautiously in NC)</td>
<td>Walker (1985, p. 58)</td>
<td>PON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open systems</td>
<td>Walker &amp; Evers (1984, p. 30)</td>
<td>PON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Against epistemological splits and dualisms</td>
<td>Walker (1985, p. 59)</td>
<td>SRHE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fact/value distinction broken down</td>
<td>Walker &amp; Evers (1994, p. 5029)</td>
<td>SRHE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory/practice distinction cannot be drawn</td>
<td>Walker (1987, p. 9)</td>
<td>DPF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanatory power (implied in NC)</td>
<td>Walker &amp; Evers (1984, p. 30)</td>
<td>SRHE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interest in application of neurobiology (future open for the mind to be reduced to neuro-science)</td>
<td>Evers &amp; Lakomski (1994a, p. 32; 2000)</td>
<td>PON</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability of truth to be context-sensitive</td>
<td>Walker &amp; Evers (1984, p. 28)</td>
<td>DPF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A naturalised ethics and morality</td>
<td>Evers &amp; Lakomski (1991, p. 11)</td>
<td>DPF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rejects the “state” as the only framework which can support democratic social life</td>
<td>Walker (1987, p. 7)</td>
<td>Collier (1994)</td>
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</table>

Walker (1985, p. 56) states that naturalistic coherentism has five main features - “it is holist (or coherentist), physicalist, monist, historical, and pragmatist”. NC is holistic in that it maintains there is no distinction between facts, sense data and intuition, and knowledge from deduction or induction. All knowledge is theory, a form of “Touchstone theory”. This holistic epistemology includes a coherence theory of evidence, but not of truth (Walker, 1985, p. 56-57).

NC is physicalist in that when a situation arises where an inconsistency between a physical theory and a sociological theory exists, NC insists the sociology be revised rather than the physics (Walker, 1985, p. 57). NC is monist in that it denies epistemic partitioning; and historical in that it insists “history is the only option” in the sense that there are no “metaphysically guaranteed procedures in the search for knowledge” (Walker, 1985, p. 57).

The pragmatist dimension of NC is derived from its historical orientation. Pro CR, NC does not accept that a lack of foundations of knowledge automatically means an inability to choose between competing truth-claims.

Rather than inferring the inevitability of a debilitating relativism from knowledge’s being bounded by historical context, MP [materialist
pragmatism, or NC] proposes procedures for distinguishing between the more and the less productive and progressive knowledge claims (Walker, 1985, p. 58).

Because empirical evidence is not the only evidence of import in deciding between theories, Evers and Lakomski (1991, p. 42) have borrowed Churchland’s (1985) term “superempirical” to describe the other aspects of theory-choice. In NC, the content and structure of a theory is determined by appeals to the “global excellence of such theory, to its overall coherence, including the requirement that it cohere with natural science” (Evers & Lakomski, 2000, p. ix).

Here the importance of the concept of coherence is emphasised. The holistic perspective of NC means that coherence has primacy above all - “the question whether to accept or reject a particular knowledge claim hinges on its coherence with the rest of our fabric of knowledge, i.e. OTOTW [our theory of the world]” (Walker & Evers, 1984, p. 27). As holists, proponents of NC acknowledge that all evidence comes theory-laden; which then leads to “non-foundationalist… coherence-producing procedures to facilitate theory-choice and deal with evidence” (Walker & Evers, 1984, p. 27). As a result, NC borrows the term “Touchstone” from Lakatos (1970), to describe the areas which overlap in competing theories.

Touchstone is an intertheoretic set of concepts and methods and the empirical evidence they generate and incorporate, geared to processing information and solving problems in the natural world… As such, unlike the epistemic items posited by foundational epistemologies, it is not fixed (Walker, 1991, p. 509).

First the concept of “Touchstone” is used to find the common ground between competing theories (Walker & Evers, 1994, p. 5029). Second, the differences between the theories are examined against coherence criteria, which are “simplicity, consistency, comprehensiveness, fecundity, familiarity or principle, and explanatory power” (Walker & Evers, 1994, p. 5027). A decision is then made in favour of the theory which fares best against these criteria. Third, it is the theory itself – by its internal structure and theoretical resources - which then determines its correspondence with reality. Walker explains further:

A Quinean pragmatic realism employs the coherence tests of the superempirical virtues to sort out the merits of competing theories, and permits us to use the resources of the resulting preferred theory to spell out its relation to the world, to specify what constitutes, in its case, truth as a correspondence relation between the sentences of the theory, and the facts of the matter. A coherence theory of evidence is distinct from and compatible with a correspondence theory of truth (Quine, 1970). Epistemological pragmatism and coherentism are partners with scientific realism…(Walker, 1991, p. 509).

In the last part of this process a potential deficiency in NC becomes apparent. The first part of the process is consonant with CR – that of choosing a theory based on its coherence criteria. The problem for NC comes when, after having chosen a theory, it then relies upon the correspondence of the theory with reality. This raises several potential problems. The first is that by virtue of NC’s reliance on the concept of correspondence, Bhaskar’s criticisms of correspondence outlined in the previous Chapter apply. More seriously, however, the second part of this process reveals a

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1 As opposed to DCR, where absence has primacy above all. This is significant for the last section of the paper.
potential lack of the key DCR concepts of *alethia* and *absence*. This lack will be discussed further shortly.

## 2 CR in Education: David Corson

David Corson\(^2\) has pioneered the examination of the suitability of CR as a perspective for the field of education. His reading of the difficulties of other dominant philosophical traditions in education constitutes an important platform for critical realists working in this area. Corson examined the contributions of Popper, Dewey and Quine to the philosophy of education, and argued that Bhaskar’s critical realism is a more suitable alternative to these influential positions. Corson identified the problems of Popper’s and Dewey’s epistemologies for the enterprise of education thus:

… for Popper confirmatory evidence has little or no status; and for Dewey confirmed and publicly assertable observations always give the accounts and the reasons that depend on them a precedence over other accounts and reasons that are without an observable basis.

*(Corson, 1990a, p. 37)*

As a result of his critique of Popper and Dewey for the field of education, Corson (1990a, p. 37) goes in search of a “contemporary conception of education”, and proposes that Bhaskar’s critical realism fits the criteria for a new conception of education by virtue of (i) its evolutionary form, and (ii) its ability to retain the strengths of Popper and Dewey without becoming entangled in their weaknesses.

On Corson’s (1990a) reading, Bhaskar’s epistemology is an effective extension of Dewey’s and Popper’s, one that can accommodate the strengths of each approach and avoid their problems. To support this claim, Corson (1991a) outlines five key strengths of critical realism for the field of education:

- Firstly, as a “model” for research, it is not “excessively technical”;
- Secondly, it is parsimonious in that it keeps the strengths of other useful theories, such as Popper’s while avoiding their inherent problems;
- Thirdly, it is based on and accounts for the role of evolutionary epistemology;
- Fourthly, it offers a plausible model of explanation in open systems; *RRRE\(^3\) is better than Popper’s P1→TT→EE→P2*;
- Fifthly, it is operationalisable on a *de-facto* basis, in that many researchers are already “doing” it.

*(adapted from Corson, 1991a, p. 195-196)*

While Corson’s criticisms of the problems of Popper and Dewey in education are valid, his criticism of the work of Walker, Evers and Lakomski seems to take the form of a critique of Quine, upon whom Walker, Evers and Lakomski draw heavily.

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\(^3\) This four-phase process is outlined in *The Possibility of Naturalism*, (p. 129): 
*Resolution* of a complex event into its components (causal analysis).
*Redescription* of component causes.
*Retrodiction* to possible (antecedent) causes of components via independently validated normic statements.
*Elimination* of alternative possible causes of components.
Because Corson raises some problematic aspects of Quine for education which do not necessarily apply to Walker and Evers, what results from Corson is an indirect and misplaced criticism of the tradition of naturalistic coherentism.

### 2.1 Corson’s Misplaced Criticism of Walker and Evers: Quine’s Problems in Education

While acknowledging the value and influence of the work of Walker and Evers, Corson is not completely happy with a Quinean model of educational epistemology, and disagrees over the amount of scepticism one should bring to the theorising process, given the “ubiquitous and intricate influence of human intentions on human behaviour” (Corson, 1990a, p. 31). Corson is ill at ease with the primacy Quine ascribes to the behaviouristic over the mentalistic. As a result, his dissatisfaction with Walker and Evers mainly concerns the extent of scepticism that should be attached to theorising about knowledge.

My disagreement with Walker and Evers is probably a matter of degree (since there is no disagreement on the importance of ‘error elimination’ in the growth of knowledge); it mainly concerns the reply that we would make to the following: in the light of the ubiquitous and intricate influence of human intentions on human behaviour, how much informed scepticism should we bring to our theorising about knowledge issues? I find in Dewey’s Popper’s and Bhaskar’s conceptions of discovery, rather than in Quine’s, more reasonably sceptical views of the epistemological enterprise. (Corson, 1990a, p. 31)

For Quine, the most satisfactory explanations of human behaviour are physiological. Corson’s problem here is that ontologically real physiological explanations are hard to achieve - especially in the field of education, with complex forms of human behaviour in open-ended systems where possible links between cause and effect are obsfucated by myriad other factors. In the absence of physiological explanations, behaviouristic explanations are given preference by Quine over mentalistic explanations. Corson explains further:

Much of education, for example, is predicated on the view that from a student’s public manifestation of language behaviour (either oral or written) we are entitled to make rough estimates about what is going on under the surface (i.e. what physiological activity is taking place, what cognitive events are proceeding). (Corson, 1990a, p. 32)

However, approaching epistemology in education in such a way poses two problems according to Corson (1990a, p. 32). The first problem relates to the potential for behaviouristic explanations to be “overthrown” as another, more superior form of explanation comes to the fore. If this occurred, Corson claims that Walker and Evers’ work as the application of Quine’s theorising for epistemology in education would be “stripped of its support structure” (Corson, 1990a, p. 32). This possibility is often overlooked as “the Quinean theory’s priorities are tilted against such evidence [mentalistic] ever being seen as serious in the hierarchy of explanations” (Corson, 1990a, p. 32).

The second problem is more serious in terms of the implications for curriculum theory. Corson argues that Quine’s privileging of the behaviouristic over the
mentalistic could “downgrade a consideration of human intentionality as a factor in a social science research process” (Corson, 1990a, p. 32). This “downgrade” of the reasons of rational individuals ignores the important human attribute of “second-order monitoring”. Corson (1990a, p. 32) states that such second-order monitoring “gives special status to people’s accounts of their own behaviour and this status often equals, if not surpasses, the status that derives from criteria established through a third person’s observations”.

However, this criticism does not necessarily apply directly to Walker and Evers. In fairness to their work, Corson (1990a, p. 46) himself notes that Walker accords much more weight to human intentions as reasons than Quine’s theorising would seem to allow – so much so that Corson claims that this aspect of Walker’s work would sit quite easily with Bhaskar’s theory. From this point on, Corson’s position devolves into an important examination of the problems that Quine encounters in education, but one that does not necessarily apply to the work of Walker and Evers in education – despite their work being the most influential application of Quine in the field.

Although naturalistic coherentism obviously draws upon Dewey and Quine, it does not necessarily follow that a criticism of Dewey or Quine is an automatic criticism of naturalistic coherentism. Indeed, the perils of criticising Walker, Evers and Lakomski indirectly via Quine, Dewey or others have been well documented (Maddock, 1994; Evers & Lakomski, 1994b). As a result, Corson seems to fall into the same trap as Maddock (1994) in criticising Walker and Evers indirectly through Quine; as evidenced by Evers and Lakomski’s reply to Maddock’s (1994) article *Three Dogmas of Materialist Pragmatism*:

Maddock has made the task of critique especially hard by failing to engage directly the most systematic recent presentation of the arguments we advance for our position. Instead, he chooses to give close attention to Margolis’s criticisms of Quine, Dilman’s and Grice and Strawson’s criticisms of Quine, Dancy’s and Cormman’s criticisms of Quine, and Chomsky’s criticisms of Quine. Maddock’s justification for dwelling on all this criticism of Quine is because he thinks we accept many of Quine’s most distinctive doctrines. And so we do, though not without reasons, some modifications here and there, and some accommodation for new development. The modifications and accommodations sometime mean that a criticism of Quine fails to carry over as a criticism of us. (Evers & Lakomski, 1994b, p. 29)

However, since Corson’s (1990a) initial criticism, it is significant to note that the dialecticalization of CR has provided new concepts – namely *absence* and a *stratified, alethic truth* – which afford a more effective examination of the strengths and weaknesses of the tradition of pragmatism in education, and specifically the work of Walker, Evers and Lakomski. The following section of this paper therefore extends the work of Corson by taking the developments of DCR and re-examining the work of Walker, Evers and Lakomski directly, rather than indirectly through a critique of Quine.

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4 Evers and Lakomski cite the influence of Churchland (1986) and Churchland (1985) as providing impetus for such modifications.
2.2 A Naturalistic Coherentist Critique of Critical Realism?

Before suggesting a critical realist critique of naturalistic coherentism in the final part of this paper, it would first be prudent to ensure that CR does not fall foul of any potential criticisms NC might make. With this in mind, this section briefly examines the criticisms NC has made of critical theory. Critical theory is a tradition in the field of education which - by virtue of its Marxist heritage and emphasis on emancipation - would prima facie seem to have some similarities with CR. As a result, there is the strong possibility that given their characterisation of critical theory in education, Walker, Evers and Lakomski would position Bhaskar’s critical realism as within that tradition. This is understandable, as Bhaskar’s CR matches Evers’ description of the two main features of critical theory:

- The first is an anti-foundational critique of science, and what purports to be scientific rationality, in favour of a broader view of knowledge with science as just one component. The second is a radical politics of schooling sustained by an ethics and a theory of capitalist societies. (Evers, 1993, p. 41)

CR also meets Evers’ description of the aims of critical theory:

- Ultimately, the aim of critical theory of education is to identify sources of social domination, oppression, and injustice and to promote the kind of individual and collective reflective practices necessary for human emancipation (Kemmis et al., 1983: 9-10; Giroux, 1983: 28-33.). (Evers, 1993, p. 41)

Evers characterises critical theory in education as building upon the work of Habermas, and cites Carr (1983, 1989) as a philosopher of education who has taken this route in an attempt to produce a “critical educational science”. From Evers’ description, there is a striking similarity with critical theory in education and Bhaskar’s critical realism:

- Such a science would produce “educative self-knowledge” that would reveal to practitioners their unquestioned assumptions and beliefs. It would employ “ethically-informed dialectical reasoning” rather than the usual logically deductive reasoning. It would interpret education not as a natural phenomenon “but as a historically-located and culturally embedded social practice” subject to ideological distortion and other constraints (Carr, 1989: 35). (Evers, 1993, p. 41)

By virtue of the prima facie similarities between CR and critical theory in education - especially regarding its social mission and use of dialectic - a further and more detailed investigation into the potential of DCR to bolster or defend the work of critical theory in education constitutes a worthwhile area for future research. However, it must for the moment remain outside the scope of this paper.

This following passage is taken at length in an attempt to preserve the intent of Evers’ criticism of critical theory:

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5 The tradition of critical theory in education as associated with the writings of authors such as Apple (1982), Aronowitz & Giroux (1991), Giroux (1983), Kemmis et al. (1983), and Young (1989).

6 While Bhaskar does not exhibit a radical politics of schooling explicitly, the connections drawn by Collier (1994), and the more recent naturalised ethics of Bhaskar (FEW), make it very easy to see how CR would imply or even produce a radical politics of schooling.
The possibility of alternatives [to the positivistic interpretation of science] signals a methodological hazard in trying to devise an epistemically defensible taxonomy for all knowledge. Either the taxonomy draws on the best knowledge under analysis, in which case that knowledge dominates the scene much as positivistically construed science did in the original problematic, or the taxonomy does not, in which case a less warranted theory of knowledge is being used to discount more warranted knowledge – such as science. The alleged middle path of quasi-transcendental deduction, or immanent critique, (or, in analytic terms, the logic of presupposition) is indeed a rocky road, as Habermas now admits. (Evers, 1993, p. 41-42)

Taking these points in the order raised by Evers, the first task here is to clarify what taxonomy Evers is talking about. It would seem that Evers is talking about a taxonomy of knowledge in which the epistemic priority of different forms or types of knowledge can be determined. Pro NC, CR raises serious questions about the wisdom of according different types of knowledge epistemic priority \textit{a priori}. Also, classification of types of knowledge may not be the same thing as classifying the types of \textit{rationality} which produce that knowledge. The DCR levels of rationality take into account the provisional nature of the classification of rationality itself, by virtue of its evolutionary roots. In addition, NC is itself suggesting a taxonomy of sorts with the concept of Touchstone providing the most important criteria for coherent evidence.

Secondly, it needs to be determined if the choices presented by Evers for critical theory are the only ones that exist for DCR; and if this is so, it then needs to be determined if the consequence given by Evers necessarily follows the choice. Choice one is that the knowledge which devised the taxonomy dominates “the scene” - which is presumably all the knowledge in the taxonomy - in the same way as positivism. Here it is implied by Evers that the domination of this knowledge will have deleterious effects on “the scene” just as positivism has. This may or may not be the case, particularly if the knowledge is holistic and evolutionary in its underpinnings, and alethically grounded. It may not be so problematic if the situation is one of non-heteronomous “determination”, as CR maintains that determination can be \textit{needed} and \textit{wanted}, and that a complete absence of determination is prohibitive for emancipation.

Apart from this, the consequence of the first option identified by Evers does not necessarily follow for DCR. The concept of emergence means that it is entirely possible that knowledge could arise as emergent, but irreducible to the previous “best at the time”, and become the “new” best. In addition, the reciprocal nature of emergence leaves open the possibility of this emergent form to then modify the taxonomy which gave rise to it.

The second choice is that of a less warranted theory of knowledge discounting a more warranted knowledge, such as science. If this was the case the argument itself would be moving outside the bounds of being rational\textsuperscript{7}. According to the judgment form of CR, a situation where a more coherent theory (a) is wilfully chosen over another less coherent theory (b) - knowing full well that it is less coherent - means the possibility of that choice being rational is lessened.

\textsuperscript{7} The criteria of Touchstone in NC would also indicate this is the case.
Of the middle path, that of immanent critique and the “quasi-transcendental”, Evers (1993, p. 42) states that it is a “rocky road”. Here Evers and Lakomski (1991, p. 12) focus on Habermas’s immanent critique, thus:

For if the traditional view of science is wrong, and we know that it is thanks to the work of Quine, Kuhn, Feyerabend, Hesse and others, then the story Habermas tells of empirical science being constituted by technical interests of control and manipulation is also wrong. This is because Habermas’s account of empirical-analytic science is as much dependent on traditional empiricist theories of science as the traditional science of administration that Bates is using Habermas’s machinery to criticise. (Evers & Lakomski, 1993, p. 13)

However, in the case of DCR, Bhaskar does not rely solely on “traditional empiricist theories of science” to describe “empirical-analytic science”, but rather employs many strategies in arguing against irrealism in its most subtle of forms. His tools are “immanent, omissive, antinominal and metacritical critiques, along with diachronic and synchronic analysis (PE, p. 170).

Evers and Walker also express a dissatisfaction with Benson’s (1983) dialectic in critical theory for analysing change:

… there is no obvious hiatus in scientific theory that might call for any special contribution from dialectical analysis construed materially. The physics of dynamics is all we need to know in the study of matter in motion. In what way, then, does a scientific study of opposing causal tendencies in social phenomena omit, in principle, explanatory and predictive material that can be provided by dialectical analysis? Given the comprehensiveness of scope that science assumes for itself, it is difficult to know where to look for the gaps. (Evers & Lakomski 1991, p. 147)

However, Benson’s dialectic as criticised by Evers and Lakomski (1991, p. 142-148) is not CR’s dialectic. Bhaskar’s dialectic and praxis are different in the important respect of the key category of absence, with the significant consequence that praxis then becomes a process of transformative negation. NC’s criticisms of the problematic notion of contradiction in dialectic is avoided by CR since the engine of dialectic for the latter is not contradiction, but absence. NC criticises Benson’s (1983) dialectic because as a category, contradiction can only apply to a combination of thoughts, not to reality. But this is not the case with absence, which can exist in both thoughts and in the physical world in the form of lack.

Thus, in answer to Evers and Lakomski’s question of where to look for the gaps, CR replies that the answer is the gaps – it is the category of absence. Bhaskar’s category of absence is a condition of the possibility of science itself; without absence there would be a block totality, and hence an absence of the possibility of dynamics. NC criticises dialectic for not being useful in explaining change because NC conceives of change in terms of difference, whereas Bhaskar maintains that change be conceived in terms of absence (PE, p. 135). As a result, the dialectic of CR avoids the NC criticism of dialectic in critical theory.

NC also criticises the dialectic of critical theory as ineffective in the movement toward emancipation. Evers and Lakomski (1991, p. 148) state that “talk of dialectical analysis as a distinctive basis of social inquiry will bring us no closer to finding the
causes of social inequality and oppression”. However, by identifying absence as the driving force of dialectic, Bhaskar is able to express social inequality and oppression in a different way. Contrary to Evers and Lakomski’s assertion, Bhaskar’s dialectic reveals social inequality and oppression as fundamentally concerned with absence; and their solution is conceived of as the absenting of constraints upon absenting ills (DPF, p. 238). In this way, contra Evers and Lakomski, not only is dialectic useful for emancipation; it is, by virtue of the category of absence, absolutely vital for emancipation. By virtue of CR’s unique forms of dialectic and absence, along with its emancipatory agenda, it would constitute an unfair and inaccurate generalisation to characterise CR as another form of critical theory. However, it would also seem that the authors of critical theory in education such as Carr, Kemmis, Giroux and Aronowitz would find ample support for their agendas within CR. Pending further investigation, it would seem that Bhaskar’s thought has produced some significant advances for these authors.

From this cursory examination, it would seem that while Bhaskar’s CR may constellationally contain, or over-reach the position of critical theory, it is not able to be positioned with critical theory as a branch of the “paradigms” tradition that Evers’ and Lakomski (2000, p. 6) outline, and so, prima facie is not subject to the criticisms of NC here. In the same way as it was mentioned earlier that not all criticisms of Quine can be directly applied to naturalistic coherentism, so too, caution should be exercised in applying criticisms of critical theory to CR.

3 A DCR Critique of NC – Lack of Absence and Alethia

3.1 Lack of Alethia

Now we turn directly to the work of Walker, Evers and Lakomski. As mentioned earlier, NC stands out from the rest of the pragmatic tradition because of its unusual two-step combination of coherence criteria for evidence, with a correspondence theory of truth. Evers explains how NC handles a truth-claim by employing coherence and correspondence respectively:

Theory of evidence is concerned with the global excellence of theory, and involves both empirical adequacy, inasmuch as this can be achieved and the superempirical virtues of simplicity, consistency, comprehensiveness,

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8 The strength of Bhaskar’s argument on this in the very last paragraph of DPF (p. 385) is most compelling.

9 It is important to note that Bhaskar’s criticisms of Churchland’s eliminative materialism also apply directly to NC (PE, p. 101). Churchland’s pragmatism has been identified by Evers and Lakomski (1991) themselves as underpinning NC. Churchland’s materialism is a variant of the dominant form of philosophical materialism - central state materialism. Bhaskar describes central state materialism as involving three steps, and eliminative materialism as involving only the last two of the three (see PE, p. 101-102). Bhaskar questions the stability and consistency of eliminative materialism, and its ability to deal with the embeddedness of truth as a concept in human rationality. He states that the eliminative materialism of Churchland seems to be a “theory/practice inconsistency” in that “human beings need intentionalistic truth-talk to get about the world” (PE, p. 102).
fecundity, familiarity or principle, and explanatory power. Once the best theory according to these coherence criteria has been established, it is the resulting theory itself that is used to state what exists and how the theory’s sentences match up with that posited reality. (Walker & Evers, 1994, p. 5028)

### 3.1.1 Benign and Vicious Relativism (NC): Epistemological Relativism and Ontological Realism (DCR).

This coherence-correspondence two-step means that NC is one of the most “realist” forms of pragmatism. Unlike other forms of pragmatism, NC does make a claim for realism, albeit a weak realism.

The natural world is a real world; it is not constituted by our knowledge, although we and our knowledge are part of it; our naturalism is epistemologically realist... Holism, naturalism, pragmatism and realism become the crucial features of our account of knowledge. (Walker, 1991, p. 507)

However, as Bhaskar (RTS, p. 40) claims, all philosophies “secrete” an ontology, even idealism. Therefore it is the degree and type of realism which is at issue here. Despite its realist claims, the coherence-correspondence two-step in NC indicates a lack of an alethically-grounded truth.

The coherence-correspondence two-step in NC involves compiling a theory of evidence, choosing a competing truth-claim on the basis of this criteria, then letting the theory itself – by means of its internal structure and theoretical resources – determine the degree to which it corresponds with reality. This seems to be the way NC deals with the situation of a fallible apprehension of a mind-independent reality. Evers (1987, p. 11) believes that as a result of using coherence validity and correspondence truth “one is able to combine a realist interpretation of theories with a pragmatic holistic epistemology”. Similarly, Walker (1987, p. 5) states that “a feature of most neo-pragmatism is its espousal of epistemological realism as against the instrumentalism of most early pragmatism. It enables us to avoid both subjectivism and extreme relativism...”.

While such statements appear congruent with the concerns of critical realists, a question-mark needs to be placed over just how “real” the reality of NC is. For the most part NC describes itself as possessing a “coherentist realist epistemology” (Evers, 1991, p. 533). However, there are other times when the epistemology of NC is characterised as pragmatist (Walker, 1991, p. 509). At yet another time, the claims of NC to epistemological realism are juxtaposed with Walker’s comments on the impossibility of escaping epistemological relativity:

The MP [materialist pragmatist/NC] working assumption, as stated, is that although epistemological, like physical, relativity is always with us, we need to distinguish between benign and vicious relativism. (Walker, 1985, p. 67)

NC often finds itself in the awkward position of having to distinguish between “benign” relativism and “vicious” or “debilitating” relativism when dealing with the situation of a fallible apprehension of a mind-independent reality (Walker, 1985, p. 67). In contrast, CR deals with the same situation by maintaining an epistemological relativism and ontological realism. For Bhaskar, there is no such thing as “benign”
relativism - where ontology is concerned “there is no escape from truth” (Norris, 1998, p.8).

Walker explains the concept of “vicious” relativism thus:

Vicious or debilitating relativism flows from the foundationalist assumption that if there are no foundational epistemic items to which to refer in adjudicating between competing knowledge claims, there can be no adjudication but at best faith, sheer commitment or non-rational preference. (Walker, 1985, p. 67)

CR calls this debilitating relativism judgmental relativism, and similarly insists that epistemological relativism need not lead to judgmental relativism, and that judgmental rationality should be the result. However, unlike NC, CR can call for judgmental rationality because of its commitment to ontology.

Further indication of a lack of ontology in NC comes with Walker’s subsequent explanation of benign relativism:

Benign relativism hypothesises that, with or without foundations, there may be commitments common to the competing theories in which the competing knowledge claims are embedded, and that the epistemological task is to identify them and use them as instruments for identifying the theory with the most coherence and algorithmic facility. These commitments are the basis for MP’s [NC’s] conception of Touchstone theory, and they are not commitments arising out of sheer preference or prejudice…(Walker, 1985, p. 67)

Walker (1985, p. 68) describes these commitments (which are the objects of knowledge for NC) as “tenets and features common to and internal to competing theories…”. This description matches very closely Bhaskar’s (SRHE, p. 73) description of the referent in the process of referential detachment – as the common item of two incommensurable theories.

For they [competing/incommensurable theories] must differ about something: MP [NC] characterises the difference as about the solution to a sufficiently commonly specified problem or problems… For a genuine competition, then, not only must there be both agreement and disagreement, but also some implicit commitment of each competitor to a method for identifying these. Thus the first step cannot be completed without already taking the second step, which is to find out what the competing theories have in common. (Walker, 1985, p. 68)

While the dialectical flavour of the judgmental rationality of DCR is apparent here, it seems that there is a basic difference in the way Bhaskar and pragmatists such as Walker, Evers and Lakomski position themselves. Despite claiming an “epistemological realism”, nothing is more important for Walker and Evers than the coherence of a theory in a particular situation. This is epistemic relativism in the sense that they are anti-foundationalist, concerned only about those common aspects of theories which are determined by the particular context concerned – “forget about foundations and work out what counts as touchstone” (Walker, 1985, p. 70). Despite its claims to a weak realism, NC’s pragmatist underpinnings would seem to indicate that Walker, Evers and Lakomski cannot bring themselves to admit the word “ontology” in NC.
The way the two traditions identify themselves reveals what is most important to them. Walker, Evers and Lakomski call themselves epistemological realists, but also claim that "relativism is not an all-or-nothing affair" (Walker, 1985, p. 70); while Bhaskar calls himself a transcendental realist, and maintains that all philosophy (even idealism) secretes a realist ontology, it is only a matter of how much or to what degree (RTS, p. 40). Unlike NC, Bhaskar argues that the important work of epistemological relativism can only be sustained if it is alethically grounded. Indeed, Bhaskar (DPF) has shown that epistemological relativism presupposes a realist base, and conversely, that a realist base presupposes epistemological relativism.

3.1.2 Underlying Structures and Mechanisms are not “Real” in NC

There would also seem to be a difference between NC and DCR over whether or not the structures and mechanisms of science are taken to be real along with the material or physical objects of science. For critical realists, the world consists of real structures and mechanisms, and should be construed relationally (SRHE, p. 125). While Walker, Evers (1984, p. 30) are committed to "believing in the reality of all the material objects required by science" - they do not necessarily assert the reality of the structures and mechanisms of science as CR does. As a result (and most importantly for those working in education) NC does not assert the reality of underlying structures and mechanisms in the social sciences. If this is the case, it means that NC cannot account for the existence of educational structures and mechanisms in the domain of the real; the events they cause in the domain of the actual; and human perception of them in the domain of the empirical.

This uncertainty over whether or not NC views underlying structures and mechanisms as real raises another hard question for NC: if the objects of knowledge in science are real material objects (Walker & Evers, 1984, p. 30); what are the objects of knowledge of NC’s scientific theory of education? For CR, the objects of knowledge in the natural sciences, the social sciences, and therefore in education, are underlying structures and mechanisms. However, there are indications that this is not the case with NC, and these can be found in NC’s more recent interest in cognitive neurobiology.

The epistemology is specified through a reductionist view of human nature exemplified in recent restatements of physicalism by philosophers such as Clifford Hooker, Stephen Stich, and Patricia and Paul Churchland… Contemporary physicalism, focusing sharply on theories of the mind-brain, is associated with the growth of cognitive science, notably the overlapping work in cognitive neurobiology, cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence. (Walker, 1991, p. 506)

Influenced by what Bhaskar (PE, p. 101) calls the “eliminative materialism” of Churchland, NC maintains a physicalist/reductionist view of human nature (Walker, 1991). However, the form of NC’s reductionist interest in cognitive neurobiology may reveal an atomist/individualist conception of structure and human agency which Bhaskar has effectively argued against. Walker characterises the physicalist reductionism of NC thus:

As presented here, physicalism is foremost an epistemological theory, flowing from an acceptance of strong coherence requirements, chiefly that psychology, social science and educational inquiry be shown to be at least logically
consistent with and preferably reducible to physical theory. Hence, theories of mental states, if correct, will be reducible to neuroscience. (Walker, 1991, p. 512)

Evers and Lakomski (2000) have examined the implications of recent developments in cognition and information-processing research, and argue that these developments provide support, or are accommodated by naturalistic coherentism\(^{10}\). Pro NC, CR also leaves the door open for its *synchronic emergence powers materialism* (SEPM) to be reduced to neuroscience (PON, p. 98). However, CR disagrees with the NC claim that this could then lead to the reduction of the social sciences to neurobiology as well. NC’s claim in this regard would tend to indicate an underlying atomist/individualist conception of structure and agency – something which Bhaskar’s TMSA effectively criticises\(^{11}\).

CR’s rejection of the reduction of social science to neuroscience does not, however, mean that it is guilty of the “physicalistic functionalism” outlined by Walker thus:

… our physicalism is to be distinguished from another, antireductionist position prevalent in cognitive science – functionalism – which can be interpreted physicalistically. For functionalism, psychological theories of mental states are emergent from but not reducible to neuroscience, since cognition involves semantic and logical representations, whereas the study of neural structures deals only in causal relations. Psychological states are functions of the causal role they play in the brain… Their emergent functions, however, cannot be explained neurally… As against this espousal of the autonomy of psychology, the coherentist maintains that reduction to physical theory is possible, and that to adopt it as a working hypothesis is the more constructive alternative. (Walker, 1991, p. 513)

By leaving the door open to advances in neuroscience, CR is not guilty of such functionalism in regard to the mind (PON, p. 98). However, DCR would disagree with NC that the reduction of theories of mind to neuroscience means that it is also possible to reduce society to neuroscience.

Just as CR’s SEPM avoids the NC charge of functionalism, so too, there is the possibility that NC avoids the CR charge of an atomist/individualist conception of structure and agency. This possibility is found in Walker’s distinction between the actual reduction of *things* to neuroscience, and the reduction of *theories* to neuroscientific ones:

… the most important point to make is that reduction is a relation between theories, not between entities. Above all, we should be clear that the physicalist reductionist is not saying that culture is reduced to behaviour, nor

\(^{10}\) A lack of ontology is still evident in Evers and Lakomski’s (2000) discussion of these networks. Speaking of the ability of these cognitive networks to learn, Evers and Lakomski (2000, p. 16) state “supervised learning occurs by checking the net’s output against the known correct input”. It is the existence of the alethically grounded truth – the “known correct input” – which allows the success of the net’s learning function in the first place.

\(^{11}\) According to CR’s conception of structure and agency, neurobiological accounts are unlikely to account for all the things that may have an effect on a particular child learning a particular chunk of content, in a particular context, at a particular time, within a particular school, as part of a particular curriculum, as part of a particular educational policy, as part of a particular governmental strategy, as part of a particular political agenda.
the mind to the brain, but that theories of culture are reduced to theories of
behaviour, that theories of the mind are reduced to theories of the brain. In
other words, reduction is an epistemological, not an ontological, relation –
though it has ontological implications… (Walker, 1991, p. 513)

The concept of intertheoretic reduction of which Walker (1991) speaks is more clearly
outlined by Bhaskar’s depth-explanation in the context of a stratified reality. As the
phenomenon in one stratum of reality is explained, scientists progress to uncovering
the structures and mechanisms of the more base strata.

3.1.3 Indications of the Epistemic Fallacy in NC

Another effect of the lack of ontology in NC is that its coherence-correspondence
“two-step” increases the risk of committing the epistemic fallacy - where statements
about being are reduced to statements about knowledge. NC’s maintenance of
epistemic realism, and the lack of alethic grounding in the concept of “Touchstone”
increases the possibility of taking what is involved in the context of a truth-claim to
be the totality of what is involved in solving a problem.

The strategy would be to let coherence criteria grind out their story of which is
the most warranted theory, and then assume the existence of all the objects
presumed by that theory as constituting the nature of the world – what the
theory matches up with, or corresponds to.

(Evers, 1991, p. 531)

By letting the objects of the theory constitute the nature of the world, it seems that NC
reduces the totality of the problem to be solved to what can be known about the
problem through the statements of the theory – an instance of the epistemic fallacy.
Interestingly, these indications of the epistemic fallacy in NC also appear when
Walker and Evers use theology as an example to illuminate how touchstone works:

…what is touchstone in one competition may not be in another: biblical
exegesis may be touchstone in a Christian theological dispute over human
nature and destiny, but it will be useless in any dispute on that or any other
topic between atheists and for that matter in a disagreement between a
Christian and a materialist. Touchstone will vary along with OTOTW [our
theory of the world] and vice-versa; or, more precisely, out touchstone is part
of OTOTW. (Walker & Evers, 1984, p. 27-28)

This would seem to present a picture of a completely contextualised truth; and here
the problem of the absence of alethic truth in NC is revealed. The idea that biblical
truth has no bearing for atheists arguing over human nature and destiny reveals that
Walker and Evers take what is contained in the respective theories of the arguing
atheists as constituting the totality of what is actually involved in human nature and
destiny. If biblical theories have an alethic element then it is completely possible that
these theories contain aspects of truth which exist independently of both the atheists’
theories, and the atheists’ existence. Indeed, it is possible that the atheists’ theories
themselves contain aspects of an alethic truth which exists independently of them.
Biblical exegesis aside, Bhaskar’s naturalised ethics also indicates that there is an
alethic truth concerning human nature and destiny which continues to exist long after
either of the two atheists; something that the naturalised ethics of NC may find problematic.

Moreover, such a partitioning of human rationality runs counter to Quine’s web metaphor as used by Walker and Evers themselves. Under their description of the two atheists above, each individual’s “web” of knowledge is connected to the others only if they are involved in the same dispute. As soon as one individual’s web connects with another, there is a recognition of referential detachment, and therefore the intransitive dimension. If this is the case, the human rationality which produced the bible is evolutionarily connected to the human rationality that produced atheistic beliefs. As a result, contra NC, it is completely possible that the bible could have a bearing in terms of theory-choice for two arguing atheists. Without a postfoundationalist critical realist model of human rationality, NC is unable to account for the possibility of linkages between all human rationality, including those between science and religion.

3.1.4 Lack of Ontological Depth in NC’s “Touchstone”

The concept of Touchstone in NC is congruent with many aspects of the DCR concept of truth. Through its use of coherence criteria, Touchstone is useful for dealing with the normative-fiduciary (“trust me – act on it”) and adequating (“warrantedly assertable”) aspects of truth (DPF, p. 217). In NC, Touchstone is context sensitive, flexible, and revisable. In terms of finding the common in incommensurable theories, the concept of Touchstone performs a similar function in NC as that of dialectic in DCR. Walker (1991, p. 509) has even indicated that Touchstone can cope with both synchronic and diachronic emergence. However, the concept of Touchstone is retained in its entirety by CR, and extended by virtue of DCR’s ontological grounding which has the capacity to deal with the expressive referential and the alethic aspects of truth. DCR would comment that the Touchstone (common referent) should not be fixed to immutable foundations, but neither should it be completely untethered; and that its fragile, occluded, and out-of-phase tether to reality is not the same as a modernist “foundation”. In other words, the “Touchstone” of NC is not as ontologically daring as DCR.

3.1.5 A Weakened Social Agenda

From the pragmatist point of view, the justification of democracy is as relative to the problems of our natural material situation as anything else.
(Walker, 1987, p. 5)

The NC justification for democracy is a pragmatic one, whereas CR justification for democracy is alethic. For Bhaskar, the justification for democracy is that it leads to emancipation, and the justification for emancipation is that it is alethically grounded. This justification does not involve predetermination, but rather an axiological commitment. The lack of alethic grounding in NC once again raises the possibility of the epistemic fallacy on the issue of the type and form of democracy that will emerge under NC. Walker (1987, p. 2) states that “the value of democracy and the form it takes should be subject to pragmatist principles, rather than the other way around”. In contrast, CR argues that that the principles of any “position” such as democracy should be subject to an alethically grounded concept of emancipation. In CR the
grounding of emancipation in alethia indicates the type and form democracy should take. A lack of alethia would seem to have the effect of weakening the agenda or purpose of NC:

It is doubtful if the successful solution of diverse human problems can be explained by their possessing some essences or even some feature that they all have in common. ‘Advancing human flourishing’ is the usual formulation, but it is as normatively useful as a guide to practice as ‘doing good and avoiding evil’ is. (Evers & Lakomski, 2000, p. 118)

Evers and Lakomski (2000, p. 118) state that moral leadership is a matter of “securing the social conditions of effective learning in these contexts”. However, they then tacitly admit that morality and ethics cannot be completely contextual by describing an “ethical infrastructure”, indicated by virtue of the fact that moral knowledge “develops more efficiently under some ethical arrangements than others” (Evers & Lakomski, 2000, p. 118). It is precisely these aspects of “ethical infrastructure” which indicate alethia – such as “freedom of speech, tolerance of opinion, and respect for persons and their right to participate in the growth of knowledge” (Evers & Lakomski, 2000, p. 118).

3.2 Lack of Absence

The lack of ontology in the form of alethic grounding in NC, combined with the monism of NC, indicates that it also lacks the concept of absence, which DCR claims as vital. Indeed, it can be argued that the lack of the category of absence in NC is the root of all its problems with alethia mentioned above. Bhaskar (PE, p. 171) states that the most important effect of a lack of the category of absence is “to sequester existential questions generally” – a situation which seems to have occurred in NC.

The full details of Bhaskar’s arguments which show the inevitable progression of the consequences of irrealism are beyond the scope of this discussion, and the fine detail of how these critiques may relate to NC remains a task for the future. However, it is important to note at this stage that Bhaskar argues that any position which lacks an explicit ontology is in this sense irrealist. Thus, despite the rigour and influence of naturalistic coherentism in educational philosophy, and the undoubted positive outcomes its work has produced, it must eventually - at the level of meta-theory and meta-critique - find its underpinnings susceptible to the arguments of Bhaskar’s regression. Bhaskar (PE, p. 170) states that “wherever we start in the irrealist thicket we will end up with a reductio ad Cratylus”. In other words, where a lack of ontology and absence is sustained, irrealism will fill the void.

Bhaskar (DPF, p. 366) argues that to the extent that Quine refuses to talk about the causal efficacy that occurs “out there”, pragmatists such as Quine cannot achieve referential detachment, and are thus unable to repeat or explain themselves. “For what

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12 See DPF, Ch.4; PE, p. 172-174.
13 “Cratyulus was a Sophist and contemporary of Socrates, who, there is some evidence to suggest, may have had some early but lasting influence on Plato... he trumps the Heraclitian dictum that you cannot step into the same river twice (because it is continually changing) by saying that you could not step into it even once. According to Aristotle, he eventually avoided speech altogether, merely pointing. How he thought that avoided the dilemma we do not know. For, by his silence, he was saying something; just as in pointing he was indicating a relative persistent”. (PE, p. 53 footnote).
is it that they cannot repeat but an intransitive existent, a real [social] wordly object?” (DPF, p. 366). In this way, pragmatism is irrealist - albeit in one of the more moderate forms of irrealism. As a result, Bhaskar’s assessment of irrealist philosophies is simple yet devastating for NC:

Irrealist philosophy lacks. It lacks the concept of non-anthropomorphism, ontology, intransitivity, stratification, transfactuality, absence, contradiction, totality, reflexivity, and agentive agency. It lacks the concept of a social-relation-dependent, naturalistically grounded moral truth; of a non-anthropic tensed spatializing process or rhythmic, just as it lacks the concept of the presence of the past and the openness of the future, of systematic intra-activity and the contingency of being. Above all, it lacks the concept of irrealism, of metacritique, and of philosophy as a field of effects. (The biggest lie is that philosophy leaves everything as it is). It even lacks the concept of lack.

(DPF, p. 366)

While NC may not necessarily be guilty of all these irrealist sins, prima facie, there seems to be a case for arguing that, from Bhaskar’s list, NC lacks ontology, intransitivity, stratification, transfactuality, absence, agentive agency, and alethic truth. It is here the shortcomings of NC in terms of action are exposed. Without absence, Walker, Evers and Lakomski cannot separate themselves from that to which they refer, namely, their truth-claims. This occurs at the 1M of DCR. At 4D, a lack of absence means that intentional causal agency cannot be conceived as transformative negation, and so there can be no praxis (PE, p. 171). In short, NC’s lack of alethia and absence means that it has (a) no grounding for its agenda of change, and (b) no engine to drive it.

4 Summary - A DCR Critique of Naturalistic Coherentism (Pragmatism) in Education

Previous criticisms of NC by Corson (1990a) have proven ineffective, mainly because of the assumption that a critique of Quine constitutes a critique of NC. The construction of a “straw man” called NC has resulted in a subsequent criticism of points not found in NC, for example Quine’s over-emphasis on the behaviouristic.

In terms of the content of their social agendas, and their implications for the enterprise of education, the traditions of NC and DCR are strikingly similar. For example, Walker’s (1987) paper on democracy and pragmatism in curriculum development proposes strategies for organising a democratic curriculum would be readily accepted

14 1M is alethic (structured and transfactual), and includes the concepts of structure, differentiation, change, transfactual efficacy, emergence; but also the dialectical concepts of negation, becoming, contradiction, and (not necessarily directional) development. 4D is agentive and moral, and is concerned with a totality that is left open. It is the striving for the unity of theory and practice in practice. For more detail see DPF, p. 8-14.
by CR proponents\textsuperscript{15}. Similarly, Walker’s (1988, 1991) NC research on youth culture in inner-city Sydney has been identified by Corson (1998) as valuable in identifying ways to help emancipate students from oppressive educational structures. Walker’s research recommendations regarding problem-solving and negotiation are congruent with Corson’s (1998) model of critical policy making, which itself is based on CR.

The power and significance of the work of Evers, Walker and Lakomski comes precisely because they constitute a “realist” form of pragmatism. This has allowed Walker, Evers and Lakomski to sustain devastating attacks on their critics, while claiming that they avoid the descent into “debilitating relativism”. Bhaskar’s comment about all that is good in Habermas’s “transcendental pragmatism” resonates for all that is good in NC:

There is much that is valuable to be rescued from this [Habermas’s emancipatory mission], including… a materialistically mediated conatus to consensus, if only it were set in a critical naturalist and transcendental realist perspective. (RR, p. 189)

Evers (1987, p. 19) argues that Dewey’s naturalism, combined with the contribution of Quinean holism, is the best way to further the mission of a scientific educational theory. However, this paper argues that DCR is better equipped for this task in two ways.

(i) Because of its grounding in alethia, DCR has a sense of mission and purpose lacking in NC. NC is concerned with furthering the contribution of science to educational theory, whereas DCR is concerned to further the cause of science in educational theory in order to achieve emancipation and eudaimonia.

(ii) In DCR, absence is the engine which drives praxis. NC does not seem to conceive of change in terms of absence, and as a result has no transformative negation, or praxis with which to drive its agenda.

Despite being one of the most “realist” forms of pragmatism, it would seem that the NC of Walker, Evers, and Lakomski - like other forms of pragmatism - still makes the mistake of conflating the existence of an external reality with a set of foundational assumptions. NC does not allow for the idea that it is possible to eschew direct

\textsuperscript{15} Walker’s “general remarks” on practical application of demarchy are quite thorough, and deserve to be read in the context of the original paper, rather than the following inadequate abbreviation:

\begin{itemize}
  \item trustee bodies draw up an agenda of problems which the curriculum will be designed to solve.
  \item The question of who is to be represented on the trustee body is a matter for inquiry.
  \item On this issue, a distinction is drawn between direct interests (parent and students), and indirect interest (workers, employers and members of the general public).
  \item In situations where there is a case for the representation of indirect interests, direct interests should have a majority representation.
  \item The job of trustee bodies would be to identify problems to which educational solutions were appropriate, and to consider solutions (curricula) proposed from whatever source, but especially professional educators, including classroom teachers.
  \item Trustee bodies will be free not only to encourage the full deployment of expertise in curriculum development, but to choose between competing or alternative proposals.
\end{itemize}

(adapted from Walker, 1987, p. 7-9)
foundations and still insist on the existence of a mind-independent reality. This constitutes the core of the difference between the “antifoundationalism” of pragmatism, which imports an irrealist bent, and the “postfoundationalism” of critical realism, which carries with it realist tenets. Accordingly, pragmatism - including NC - is forced to set the idea of truth aside, and is left to concentrate on coherence instead.

The lack of an ontology in the form of alethic grounding of truth-claims, and the lack of the category of absence are issues that raise some hard questions for NC. The dissatisfaction of NC with dialectic as an instrument for emancipation stems from the lack of the category of absence in NC. In the same way, the awkwardness of NC’s efforts of distinguishing between “benign” and “debilitating” relativism would seem to reveal the ultimate irrealism of its pragmatist heritage. CR maintains that pragmatism – even the “realist” pragmatism of NC – is no vaccine against the “inevitability of a debilitating realism” (Walker, 1985, p. 58). Without absence, and a grounding in alethia, there is nothing to prevent the “benign” eventually turning into the “malignant” - triggering the descent into relativism.

Without an explicit ontology, the NC claims of a naturalism in “Touchstone” which “forces theories into a testing relation with the real world” (Walker, 1991, p. 512) cannot be sustained. In contrast, DCR acknowledges that knowledge is a web, but that the web has to have an alethic tether to ontology somewhere. Where that tether is, and of what kind, are the hard, seemingly impossible questions posed by the stratified and out-of-phase nature of reality. To draw upon Quine’s famous metaphor which NC so frequently employs, the web - for it to be a web, with its strands tensed in time and space - must be tethered to something. For just as a spider’s web collapses once it ceases to be attached to anything at all, so too does epistemology collapse when it is not tethered, however precariously, to ontology.

Further extension and engagement between naturalistic coherentism and dialectical critical realism remains a task for the future. As mentioned at the outset, this discussion is not intended to be a sustained DCR critique of NC, but merely an investigative probe as to how much critical realist weight the naturalistic coherentist bridge can bear.
References

Brad Shipway, Critical Realism and Pragmatism in Educational Research 24


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