



Roy Bhaskar

United Kingdom, Philosopher of Science and Social Science, 1944–2014

Roy Bhaskar was a British philosopher best known as the originator of Critical Realism. He studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Balliol College, Oxford, graduating with first-class honours in 1966. His doctoral work, supervised by Rom Harré, developed into *A Realist Theory of Science* (1975). In that book Bhaskar argued that science is intelligible only if the world has structures, causal powers and generative mechanisms that exist independently of our observations of them. He distinguished the real, the actual and the empirical and emphasised that causal laws concern tendencies and mechanisms rather than constant conjunctions of events.

The Possibility of Naturalism (1979) extended this realist ontology to the human sciences. Bhaskar argued that social structures are real but depend upon human activity for their reproduction and transformation. His transformational model of social activity sought to avoid both methodological individualism and the reification of society. Later work developed explanatory critique and then dialectical critical realism, giving increasing attention to change, absence, emergence and totality.

Bhaskar taught at Edinburgh and Sussex and later held appointments in Norway and Sweden. From 2007 he was a World Scholar at the Institute of Education, University of London. Although not primarily a systems scientist, his accounts of causal powers, emergence, stratification, open systems and structure–agency relations are directly relevant to foundational and social systems theory.

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Notes

DG = General Systems Definition; **PG** = General Systems Proposition; **DS** = Special Systems Definition; **PS** = Special Systems Proposition. Each item is identified by the researcher's surname followed by its category and number (e.g. **Bhaskar DG.1**). (*Explicit*) indicates that the definition or proposition is directly stated in the researcher's work. (*Reconstructed*) indicates that it has been reconstructed from the researcher's work but is not explicitly stated in that form.

Definitions Relevant to General Systems Theory

Bhaskar DG.1

The Real (*Explicit*): The domain comprising what exists and has causal efficacy, including structures, mechanisms and causal powers, whether or not they are activated, produce events, or are experienced or observed.

Common idiom: The Real comprises entities and their organised causal capabilities, including causal potential that may exist without presently producing an observable effect.

Explanation: The Real should not be understood as a hidden world separate from observable reality. For Bhaskar it is the most inclusive domain: mechanisms, events and experiences are all real. Its distinctive importance is that causal structures and powers can be real without being actualised or empirically observed. This allows causal explanation to extend beyond observed regularities.

Bhaskar DG.2

The Actual (*Explicit*): The domain of events that occur when causal powers and mechanisms are exercised, whether or not those events are experienced or observed.

Common idiom: The Actual comprises realised events and changes produced through causal interaction, including events that occur without being detected.

Explanation: The Actual is therefore narrower than the Real. A causal power can exist without producing a particular event, while an event that does occur is actual even if nobody observes it. In open systems, the event that occurs may result from several interacting mechanisms rather than expressing any one mechanism in isolation.

Bhaskar DG.3

The Empirical (*Explicit*): The domain of experiences and observations through which some actual events become accessible to human investigation.

Common idiom: The Empirical comprises information about reality acquired through observation or experience; it represents only the observed or experienced part of what actually occurs.

Explanation: The Empirical is narrower than the Actual because events can occur without being observed. It is narrower still than the Real because causal powers and mechanisms may exist and operate without being directly observable. Bhaskar therefore rejects the reduction of reality to what can be empirically observed.



Bhaskar DG.4

Causal power (*Reconstructed*): A causal power is a capacity possessed by a thing, by virtue of its nature or structure, to bring about or contribute to an effect under appropriate conditions.

Common idiom: An entity may possess a potential for causal interaction even when that potential is not currently realised.

Explanation: Bhaskar develops an ontology of powers and tendencies rather than defining causal power in a single dictionary-style sentence. The formulation is therefore reconstructed from his account.

Bhaskar DG.5

Generative mechanism (*Reconstructed*): A generative mechanism is a real structure or process whose operation produces tendencies and may generate events, whether or not those events are observed.

Common idiom: A persistent causal organisation can possess mechanisms that, when activated in suitable circumstances, contribute to changes or events.

Explanation: Mechanisms belong to Bhaskar's domain of the real. Their operation should not be equated with an invariably observed event, because other mechanisms may modify or counteract their effects.

Bhaskar DG.6

Open system (*Explicit*): An open system is one in which multiple mechanisms may operate together so that constant conjunctions of events cannot normally be expected.

Common idiom: An open system is a causal situation in which several interacting causal processes can contribute to outcomes, preventing simple one-to-one prediction from a single process.

Explanation: For Bhaskar, most naturally occurring situations are open. Experimental closure is a special achievement that allows a mechanism to be isolated.

Bhaskar DG.7

Emergence (*Reconstructed*): Emergence occurs where a higher-level entity or structure possesses properties or causal powers that are not reducible to those of its lower-level constituents considered separately.

Common idiom: Organisation of components can produce causal capabilities of the resulting whole that are not possessed by the unorganised components individually.

Explanation: Emergence is central to Bhaskar's stratified ontology, although later critical realists have developed more explicit accounts of how emergent powers arise.



Bhaskar DG.8

Stratification (Reconstructed): Reality is differentiated into levels or strata whose entities possess distinctive structures, mechanisms and causal powers.

Common idiom: Assemblies can form higher-level entities with their own causal capabilities while remaining dependent upon lower-level entities and processes.

Explanation: Bhaskar uses stratification both for the distinction between real, actual and empirical domains and for differentiated levels of nature. This entry concerns the latter.

Propositions Relevant to General Systems Theory

Bhaskar PG.1

Causal laws are transfactual (Explicit): Causal laws describe the tendencies of generative mechanisms and can remain operative even when their characteristic effects are not manifested in events.

Common idiom: A causal capability can remain real when its expected effect is prevented, modified or masked by other causal processes.

Explanation: This rejects the identification of causal laws with constant empirical regularities.

Bhaskar PG.2

Reality is not exhausted by experience (Explicit): The structures and mechanisms that generate events exist independently of whether the events are experienced or observed.

Common idiom: What exists and acts causally is not limited to what is currently observed or represented epistemically.

Explanation: Bhaskar distinguishes the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical.

Bhaskar PG.3

Experimental closure reveals mechanisms (Reconstructed): Experiments can create relatively closed conditions in which the operation of a selected mechanism can be isolated from interfering mechanisms.

Common idiom: By constraining the causal environment, an experiment can make the contribution of a particular causal process easier to identify.

Explanation: The closure is produced experimentally; it is not assumed to characterise the world outside the experiment.

Bhaskar PG.4

Emergent powers resist reduction (Reconstructed): Where a higher-level entity has emergent causal powers, explanation cannot be replaced completely by descriptions of lower-level constituents alone.

Common idiom: A system-level causal capability may depend upon its components while requiring the organisation and relationships of the whole for its explanation.

Explanation: Bhaskar's anti-reductionism follows from his stratified and emergent ontology.



Bhaskar PG.5

Ontological and epistemological questions must be distinguished (Reconstructed):

Questions about what exists and how it acts should not be reduced to questions about what can be known or experienced.

Common idiom: Models and observations are epistemic representations of reality; they should not be confused with the entities and causal processes they represent.

Explanation: This reflects Bhaskar's critique of the epistemic fallacy and is highly relevant to systems modelling.

Definitions Relevant to Special Systems Theories

Bhaskar DS.1

Social structure (Reconstructed): A social structure is a relatively enduring set of relations, positions and conditions that pre-exists particular actions while depending upon human activity for its continued reproduction or transformation.

Common idiom: A social system contains persistent relational organisation that constrains and enables agents but is continually reproduced or changed through their actions.

Explanation: This definition is specific to social systems and should not be generalised unchanged to non-social systems.

Bhaskar DS.2

Agency (Reconstructed): Agency is the capacity of human actors to act intentionally within conditions they did not create, thereby reproducing or transforming social structures.

Common idiom: Agents are causally capable components of social systems whose actions occur within inherited structural conditions and can alter those conditions.

Explanation: Bhaskar distinguishes human action from the structural conditions that enable and constrain it.

Bhaskar DS.3

Explanatory critique (Reconstructed): An explanatory critique links a demonstrably false or inadequate belief to the social conditions that causally sustain it, opening those conditions themselves to criticism.

Common idiom: A social explanation may identify causal structures that reproduce systematically misleading beliefs and thereby provide grounds for evaluating those structures.

Explanation: This is a specialised social-scientific and normative development of Critical Realism, not a proposition about systems generally.



Propositions Relevant to Special Systems Theories

Bhaskar PS.1

Transformational model of social activity (*Explicit*): People do not create society from nothing; they reproduce or transform pre-existing social structures through their activity.

Common idiom: Social organisation is inherited by agents as a set of enabling and constraining conditions and is subsequently maintained or altered through their actions.

Explanation: The proposition concerns the recursive relationship between agency and structure in social systems.

Bhaskar PS.2

Structure and agency are distinct but interdependent (*Reconstructed*): Social structures and human agents are ontologically distinct, but each is necessary to explain the reproduction and transformation of social life.

Common idiom: Neither social organisation alone nor individual action alone provides a sufficient causal account of social-system change.

Explanation: This rejects both reduction of society to individuals and treatment of society as an independently acting entity.

Bhaskar PS.3

Social structures are activity-dependent (*Explicit*): Social structures depend upon the activities they govern and exist only through their reproduction or transformation by human agents.

Common idiom: The persistence of social organisation requires continuing human activity; cessation or alteration of relevant activities can change or dissolve it.

Explanation: This activity-dependence distinguishes social structures from many natural structures.

Bhaskar PS.4

Social systems are intrinsically open (*Reconstructed*): Social events normally arise in open conditions in which many causal mechanisms and human actions interact, so stable event regularities should not generally be expected.

Common idiom: Outcomes in social systems usually result from multiple interacting causal processes and cannot normally be predicted from a single mechanism in isolation.

Explanation: This applies Bhaskar's open-system ontology specifically to the social domain and helps explain the limits of predictive social laws.



Student Exercise

1. **Understanding:** In your own words, describe one of this researcher's principal contributions to systems science.
2. **Generalisation:** Select one General Systems proposition. Give an example of it operating in a different kind of system from those studied by this researcher.
3. **GST or Special Systems Theory?** Select one item classified as a Special Systems Definition or Proposition. Explain why it should not necessarily be generalised to all systems.
4. **Critical evaluation:** Select one proposition and identify evidence or an example that would support it, challenge it, or indicate limits to its applicability.
5. **Translation:** Choose one of this researcher's original concepts and compare it with its common-idiom translation. What information, if any, is gained or lost in the translation?