

# CRITICAL REALISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE: RESPONSE TO ROBBINS, VAN HUYSTEEN, AND HEFNER

by *Mary Gerhart*

*Abstract.* I read Robbins's essay as a hermeneutics of suspicion against the claims of critical realism, especially the tendency of critical realism to achieve correspondence with the world rather than participation in changing it. I read van Huyssteen's essay as an application of critical realism which tends toward correspondence in spite of his correct statement of the theory. I read Hefner's paper as an exposition of both claims and methods capable of conveying truth and genuine knowledge. As such, Hefner's paper illustrates an adequate application of the theory of critical realism and overcomes the suspicion suggested by Robbins.

*Keywords:* correspondence; critical realism; falsifiability; metaphor; pragmatism; reference.

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In this commentary I will address each of the essays in the order in which they are published in this issue of *Zygon*. Then I will conclude with a summary statement of the relationships among the essays.

In his paper, "Seriously But Not Literally," J. Wesley Robbins outlines two theories—first, the theory of critical realism in which, by implication a "propositional structure . . . is supposed to define what it is for representations to be connected to reality as opposed to their being their own constructions" (Robbins 1988, 232) and, second, the theory of pragmatism, which he understands as "the accumulation of a hodge-podge of skills and procedures, bits and pieces of incompatible theories and pictures" (Robbins 1988, 242). I have considerable sympathy with his project to bring the criterion of usefulness into a sharper focus than has been often achieved by critical realists. I read Robbins's

Mary Gerhart is professor of religious studies at Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Geneva, New York 14456-3397. She presented this paper at the Theology and Science Consultation at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion held in Boston, Massachusetts, 7 December 1987.

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use of the criterion of usefulness as a hermeneutics of suspicion against Ian Barbour's and Arthur Peacocke's use of critical realism which, Robbins claims, is based on a "particular theory about the nature of the connection of our thoughts and/or words to reality, so-called *critical realism*" and masks an aspiration "to put science in its place in relation to religion" (Robbins 1988, 232).

I shall not attempt to analyze the accuracy of Robbins's critique of Barbour and Peacocke (although I find it strange that Robbins omits Barbour's and Peacocke's crucial qualifiers, religious metaphors are "more influential than" and "less subservient to abstract theories" [Robbins 1988, 236] in his claim that, for Barbour and Peacocke, religious models stand alone, apart from any *association* with theory). Instead, I wish to consider one issue somewhat more fully than he does: whether pragmatism as he describes it is adequate to the cognitive dimension of either science or religion.

Even if one were to agree that more should be made of the practical implications of scientific and religious propositions, the pragmatist account as described by Robbins is not an accurate account of everything that goes into "coping." For example, there are better and worse ways of coping and the attempt (whether or not we call it philosophical) to sort out the better from the worse ways necessarily involves "extra-practical" assumptions about rationality and irrationality and their respective values in concrete situations. It is true that the necessity for extra-practical assumptions is more difficult to see in some scientific examples than in others. The need for extra-practical assumptions is less explicit, for example, in the study of the lines in the sun's spectrum than in Albert Einstein's insistence that Galilean relativity in the field of mechanics is equivalent to Galilean relativity in the field of electromagnetism. In the case of lines in the sun's spectrum, intelligibility is sought within accepted norms whereas in the case of Einsteinian relativity, there is an explicit challenge to rationality itself.

To deny that there is some absolute way of determining what is objective and rational is not to deny that, however difficult, distinctions need to and can be made in specific contexts. For this reason, although Robbins's work is useful as a hermeneutics of suspicion regarding pretensions of critical realism to absolutism of any kind, I do not find his proposal of pragmatism persuasive as an alternative to critical realism in its essential form.

In "Experience and Explanation: The Justification of Cognitive Claims in Theology," Wentzel van Huyssteen employs what he calls a "qualified" form of critical realism. His account of critical realism causes him to disagree with Peacocke for a different reason from that of Robbins. Van Huyssteen finds Peacocke's *levels* of scientific and reli-

gious reality problematic and proposes instead that science and religion should be related epistemologically. The best question is therefore not whether the realities referred to in science and religion “exist,” but how both science and religion make “*reliable* truth-claims about domains of reality that lie beyond our experience” (van Huyssteen 1988, 252).

I very much appreciate van Huyssteen’s balanced account of critical realism. My difficulty is with his account of how it *functions* in religious understanding. Although he wishes to emphasize the importance of metaphor, the theory of metaphor he uses results in some serious deficiencies. From his frequent references to Janet Martin Soskice’s *Metaphor and Religious Language* we may infer his agreement with her definition of metaphor as “that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another” (Soskice 1985, 15). As I wrote in a review of Soskice’s book, this definition of metaphor is essentially indistinguishable from that of either analogy or model. By subsuming metaphor into analogy, neither Soskice nor van Huyssteen have a way of accounting for *new* (as distinct from traditionalist) meaning in religion and theology. Indeed, van Huyssteen creates a double dependency on tradition when he also adopts Saul Kripke’s and Hilary Putnam’s theory of reference. Van Huyssteen writes: “The reason for the referential character of religious metaphorical language will therefore not so much be any prior or ‘given’ knowledge of what is being referred to, but the fact that a speaker is a member of a linguistic community who has *passed on* the information, going back to the person or event itself” (see Kripke 1973, 195). In this view, both metaphor and reference are fixed only by tradition.

Van Huyssteen’s lack of distinction between metaphor and analogy makes it difficult for him to account for change in religious traditions and understanding. For example, he states, “In this sense the context as well as the content—that which have been ‘passed on’ in tradition and is now being referred to—determine the meaning and cognitive claim of the referent” (van Huyssteen 1988, 254). Metaphor, in other words, is used as an “epistemic access” to a context and content that is fixed “prior to and apart from any definitive knowledge” (van Huyssteen 1988, 254).

In *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding*, Allan Russell and I distinguished historically determined meanings of scientific and religious understanding from *new* scientific and religious understanding. To achieve this distinction we found it necessary to distinguish between analogy and metaphor. We took analogy to be the application of something we already know to a new

situation. Metaphor, however, we took to be the insistence that two knowns, each firmly embedded in its own field of meanings, are the same. Analogies rearrange the concepts that make up our fields of meanings: the unknown adjusts and finds its place in the known. But metaphors re-form the fields of meanings themselves.

Even if van Huyssteen's position on reference does not of itself preclude the revision of religious models, the conditions he sets forth for religious meaningfulness resist such revision: "All language, but especially metaphorical language, is therefore contextual language embedded in certain traditions of conviction, reflection and investigation which in its turn determine the interpretative character of experience" (van Huyssteen 1988, 254).

I find this theory well equipped to support a patriarchal interpretation of the religious traditions, for example, but miss evidence that it is equally equipped to support a feminist critique of that tradition. In other words, in spite of van Huyssteen's highly credible account of the theory of critical realism, his account of its application within religious understanding tends effectively to be traditionalist and is lacking in its ability to encourage criticism, revision, and change. He leaves open the question of whether critical realism, if not by design, then by effect, must succumb to a tendency to copy.

I find Philip Hefner's "Theology's Truth and Scientific Formulation," which he characterizes a thought experiment, persuasive both in its methodological sophistication and in its clear and qualified distinctions and its careful application of theory to a central claim of the Christian tradition. In that application I am especially persuaded by the theory's capability of accounting for stability and change in the worlds of religion and science.

I find especially helpful Hefner's distinction between one kind of theological statement which is made to articulate the community's experiences internally and another kind which attempts to provide explanation and interpretation of general human experience. This distinction enables Hefner to anticipate and respond to the criticism likely to spring from within the religious community that theological statements about general human experience are less about revelation than about human knowledge. Hefner maintains that such criticism misses "the mark to the extent that they fail to recognize that the tradition is not so much being diluted . . . as extended in its relevance and meaningfulness" (Hefner 1988, 267). He finds unhelpful, therefore, the distinction between natural knowledge and revealed knowledge.

Hefner also acknowledges that there are different ways of perceiving that are appropriate to wider human experience, such as the aesthetic and the scientific, an acknowledgment which indicates, I think, his

sensitivity to the need for a plurality of methods and means of validation. Nevertheless, the most important contribution he makes is based on Imre Lakatos's refinements of Karl Popper's criterion of falsifiability: first, that "a theory is falsified only if a new theory explains that which is improbable or forbidden by its predecessor" (Hefner 1988, 268) and second, that it is not the "hard core," but rather the auxiliary hypotheses of scientific research programs that bear the brunt of falsification. As applied to theological statements of the second kind—that is, those which extend the articulation of the faith-community's experience to general human experience—the canons of wide applicability, falsifiability, and fruitfulness, according to Hefner, can be commensurate with the criteria of scientific statements.

In the light of these methodological prolegomena, Hefner proceeds to develop what he calls the hard core of the research program: that is, homo sapiens as God's created co-creator. The effect of his theological theory is an extension of the significance of that body of doctrine so as to provide genuine knowledge and growth in knowledge. The effect is therefore neither only a copying nor only a repetition of the tradition. The theory involves a positive heuristic (a new interpretation of the world and of Christian faith) and a negative heuristic which is capable of differentiating positions which the theory supports from positions which it forbids.

In summary I see Robbins's work as a hermeneutics of suspicion on critical realism specifically on the latter's tendency toward correspondence with the world rather than participation in the work of changing it. I see van Huyssteen's essay as an application of critical realism which tends toward correspondence in spite of his correct statement of theory. I read Philip Hefner's essay as an exposition of both claims and methods capable of conveying truth and genuine knowledge. As such, the latter paper illustrates a good application of critical realism as explicated by van Huyssteen and an overcoming of the suspicion brought to bear on critical realism by Robbins.

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