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When Modernity and Postmodernity Fail: Re-formed Critical Realism

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to indicate the philosophical background of the concept of secular critical realism, highlight its key features, and show how, for Christian scholars, critical realism could more helpfully be termed reformed critical realism. Reformed critical realism is a distinctive perspective with solid Christian roots which provides an attractive alternative to the polarities of postmodernity on the one hand and a re-emergent modernity on the other. Though reformed critical realism has strategic parallels with the perspectives of Roy Bhaskar, it is not a mere synthetic reformulation of Bhaskar's critical realist theory. Reformed critical realism is a distinctive perspective that is reformed in a theological and foundational sense and which deserves further investigation by thoughtful Christians.

Introduction

Throughout the last few hundred years, modernism or modernity has been the predominant cultural paradigm of the west. People lived as if the systematic, logical application of the scientific method was the only way to discover truth. It owed its origins to Aristotle and the realists who came after him from the Renaissance onwards, and reflected an autonomous, optimistic view of the world, believing that this perspective would inevitably lead to the betterment of all mankind.

Modernity is often regarded as having died with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan in 1945. Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated for all to see that logical scientific enquiry was not necessarily going to lead inexorably to progress and the betterment of humankind. The resulting post-war disenchantment with modernity liberated the forces that led to the flowering of postmodernity. Postmodernity is a powerful cultural paradigm in contemporary society. For the postmodernist, science is a discredited god. There is no big story to live by any more. Truth is viewed as a social construct that will have many forms, each as legitimate as the others. The educational variant of this perspective is von Glasersfeld's radical constructivism which shapes much of contemporary educational theory and practice. Children are independent thinkers who do not discover meaning, but who actually create their own meaning in their learning activities. Concepts and methodology in English literature instruction in schools for example, from its idolisation of the hermeneutic of suspicion (which in its place has real value), to the pastiche interrogation of books, provide obvious examples of postmodern or radical constructivist determinants in the classroom.

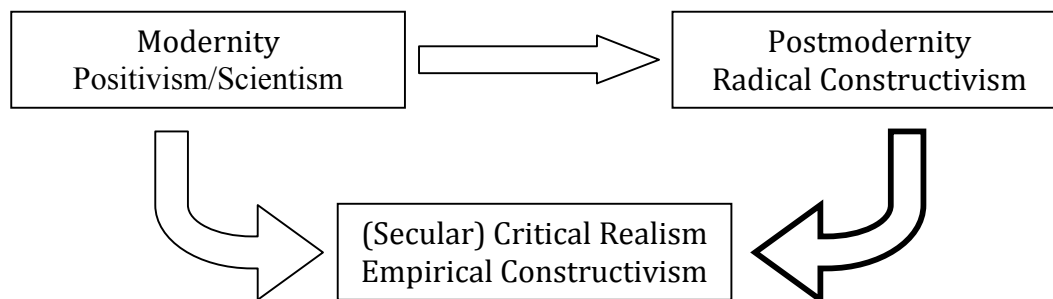


Figure 1. The above diagram provides a simplified illustration of the progression of secular ideas discussed in this paper. For most of recent history, modernity or scientific positivism has been the predominant worldview paradigm. The latter half of the twentieth century saw the wholesale abandonment of modernity with postmodernity (in education called radical constructivism) taking its place as the principle epistemological construct. Subsequent disenchantment with postmodernity's unworkable rejection of external reality and truth which intuitively is acknowledged by most people, has seen the development of new paradigms such as empirical constructivism and secular critical realism in the public domain. Reformed critical realism is not shown on the diagram because, although it has parallels with secular critical realism, it is a distinctive philosophical perspective that is not a synthetic derivative of aspects of modernity and postmodernity. It is an earnest endeavour in its own right to faithfully apply the scriptures in determining a philosophical paradigm for 21st century Christians.

Despite its insights, the fundamental dilemma with postmodernity is its transient view of truth and reality which does not ring true with the experience of many people. Most people don't want to believe the postmodern proclamation that they exist as powerless pawns in a nihilistic, purposeless belief vacuum. However, there are things that they experience in the world such as love, humour and hope which they feel are inadequately valued and understood in reductionistic modernity. What are they to do? The worldview of modernity has failed, and the postmodern worldview seems just as inadequate.

It is at this point, really only in the last few years, that critical realism has emerged. It has recognisable links to both modernity and postmodernity, but explores a third way

that is distinct from both (see the diagram above). Secular critical realism with its acceptance of reality on the one hand and recognition of the limitations of individual perceptions of that reality on the other, is seen by its adherents as the saving alternative worldview paradigm for modern western humanity:

Critical realism rescues us from the postmodernist nightmare and restores us to reality. We cannot manage without a concept of truth. There is (as most of us thought all along) a pre-existing external reality about which it is the job of science to tell us (Caldwell, 2003, p. 3)

Caldwell's comment typifies the enthusiastic response to critical realism in the secular faith community today. In my own doctoral studies a few years ago under Dr Rebecca Oxford, a renowned secular educator with globally recognised expertise in learning styles, the ability to reject radical constructivism (or full postmodernity) in favour of empirical constructivism provided her with a peer-acceptable platform from which to pursue her own research. Other respected educators also were glad to escape from the shackles of radical constructivism for this alternative worldview (albeit still non-Christian) that seemed to keep the best features of modernity without accepting the excesses of postmodernity.

Critical realism has a multi-flavoured history. Many philosophers and writers, both inside and outside of Christendom, use the term critical realism in a way that is different from the way advocated in this paper. The purpose of these few comments therefore, is to delve into the roots of modern critical realism, looking at its various expressions first in the secular faith community and then in the Christian faith community. Next, the intention is to suggest how a re-formed understanding of critical realism which we term reformed critical realism, is a perspective that reflects Vollenhoven's thetical-critical method. As such, it may well offer us a paradigm with the best possibility of approaching the Bible, God's written word, with the deepest respect, and allowing the Holy Spirit to take the Scriptures and apply them as the touchstone and direction-giver for our celebration of the Lordship of Christ over all creation.

Contemporary secular critical realism

Although critical realism's widespread contemporary appeal largely has to do with its suggestion of a credible alternative to modernity on the one hand and postmodernity on the other, the origins of the concept predate the full flowering of postmodernity.

Karl Popper

Decades before his death in 1994, Karl Popper railed against the concept that science was a neutral activity that would lead to the discovery and application of truth. For him, science, while useful in a tentative socratic way, was a process of trial and error, punctuated with myth and conjecture that leads us to a more accurate but still value-laden understanding of the way things are.

The assertion of Popper that is central to contemporary critical realism is that truth is there to be discovered, but that our perceptions of that truth must always be held lightly as they are reached on the basis of a less-than-objective lack of complete knowledge, being situated within a particular cultural context. In the same way, a child from New Zealand might think that hokey-pokey is the best flavoured ice cream in the world, but one would have to assess that judgement to be biased and contextualised if in fact the child had never been to Italy and tasted Italian gelato in Garibaldi Plaza. The judgement, while considered true by the child, has to be viewed by others as being subjective due to the limited range of the child's knowledge and experience. Make what you like of the North American penchant for calling their national baseball competition the "world series"!

Roy Bhaskar

If Popper is a forerunner of contemporary secular critical realism, then British philosopher Roy Bhaskar is its father. According to Verstegen (2000), others such as Sellars, Lovejoy and Mandelbaum propounded the notion earlier in the twentieth century, but it is Bhaskar whom most contemporary secular critical realists consider to be the originator of many of their ideas. Bhaskar was born in London in 1944 to an Indian father and English mother. Through his studies at Oxford and beyond he came to espouse a pattern of thinking or epistemological framework that avoided the excesses of modernism on the one hand and postmodernity on the other. Modernity's reductionistic rationalism suggests that absolute truth exists, and that with logic alone we can know it absolutely. Postmodernity's irrationalism insists that there is no objective view of reality, but only individualistic perspectives that are the result of one's subjective experience. Bhaskar's critical realism claims that a reality independent of our sense experience does exist, but that our limited point of view constrains our understanding of that reality. Andrew Basden (2004) puts it this way:

Critical realism says that there exists a reality independent of our representation of it, but it acknowledges that our knowledge of reality is subject to all kinds of historical and other influences. It draws a clear distinction between reality and our knowledge of reality, and Bhaskar criticises much postmodernist work for failing to distinguish between them. It sees reality and our knowledge of reality as operating in two different dimensions (p. 1)

At its core then, critical realism steers a middle path between modernity (in this context at times referred to as naïve realism), and postmodernity (or sometimes called non realism). Critical realism rejects the totalitarianism of logical positivism on the one hand, but also repudiates the incongruity of the absolute rejection of metanarrative on the other. Critical realism contends that truth exists to be known, but that a human understanding of it is partial, influenced as it must be by the limited contextualised perspective of the knower. According to Mortiz (2000, p.174), "The critical realist is conscious of the subjectivity of all human existence, but insists on differentiating between authentic and inauthentic subjectivity on the grounds of recognising the reality and basic accessibility of the things out there."

Liberal Christianity and critical realism

Christians today have responded to critical realism in many different ways. Significant writers such as J P Moreland (2004) view it as little short of a sell-out of the certainty of the gospel. Other critics of the perspective such as Travis Allen dismiss it because it is linked with N T Wright and the so-called new perspective on Paul. Still others link it with the critical-historical approach to biblical interpretation, the presuppositions of which diminish the position and authority of scripture.

Another group of more liberal contemporaries who would claim a Christian profession (a claim rejected by many evangelicals) espouse critical realism. Richard Holloway (2000), onetime bishop of Edinburgh claims to have a critical realist stance—though tendencies in his writings seem to appeal more to a unique brand of mystical positivism. Arthur Peacocke, renowned biochemist, Anglican vicar, and 2001 recipient of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, also “describes his theologically liberal Christianity as critical realism” (Christianity Today, 2001). In his investigation of secular critical realism and theological critical realism, Shipway (2000) identifies another group of theologians such as Huyssteen and Barbour for whom critical realism has an appeal—though in this case some of them also appear to give human rationality an undue primacy.

From critical realism to reformed critical realism

The reformed critical realism position suggested in this paper is related to but distinct from all of the forms of critical realism so far described. Proponents sympathetic to the understanding of critical realism advocated here include such diverse but respected evangelical Christian scholars as Don Carson, Lesslie Newbigin, Craig Bartholomew, Richard Middleton, and Mike Goheen. Furthermore:

- David Naugle (2002, P.324), in his popular reflection upon the concept of worldview, considers critical realism to be fundamental to a proper appreciation of how to approach differing world and life views. Critical realism “avoids the arrogance of modernity and the despair of postmodernity, but instead enjoys a rather modest, chastened view of knowledge marked by epistemic humility.”
- Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh (1995) sympathise with critical realism, though they contend that it still reeks too strongly of the dogmatism of logical positivism.
- Alister McGrath (2002) makes the point that critical realism fills the void left behind when modernity and postmodernity have been shown to be inadequate ways of understanding knowledge and the world. Myers (2005, p. 25) summarises McGrath’s critical realist position to the effect that it “neither absolutises the social location of knowledge, as in the postmodern thought, nor denies this social location, as in foundationalist thought.”
- N. T. Wright (1992), in one of his defining works, *The New Testament and the People of God*, affirms critical realism as an important epistemological and hermeneutical stance to take when understanding the Bible – a position that deserves investigation despite the controversy referred to above concerning the so-called “new perspective on Paul.”

- Mortiz (2000, p. 174), in his contribution for the important *Scripture and Hermeneutics* series, goes so far as to suggest that, from a reformed perspective, critical realism “presents us with the best opportunity to renew our understanding of history, literature, and theology.”

Common among the scholars mentioned here is a concern that they share with many contemporary evangelical Christians, and that is to maintain the Scriptures in the very highest place in shaping a Christian’s thinking and living, under the active influence of God’s Holy Spirit. For this reason, since a reformational confession which these scholars embrace takes an “all of the Bible for all of life” approach, this paper suggests a redefinition of their critical realist position from just critical realism alone, to reformed critical realism. Such a distinction is important. It allows for a continuity of epistemological insight with other thinkers such as Bhaskar, Holloway and Peacocke, but, as we shall see, it also acknowledges an *a priori* commitment to biblical authority which secular thinkers and liberal Christians deny. Reformed critical realism allows for a connectedness with other critical realist thinkers, thus establishing a vibrant conversation with them and their insights, but it also distances itself from their essentially experiential foundation.

Critical realism, Vollenhoven, and thetical-critical method

So what then is this distinctive variant of critical realism that we are calling reformed critical realism? There are three significant components to reformed critical realism. They show that reformed critical realism is distinct from secular critical realism in that the starting faith commitment of secular critical realism remains the human mind whereas the starting point or presuppositional commitment of reformed critical realism is the existence, authority and involvement of a knowable God who has revealed himself through His word including Jesus, and that all of life is lived out in obedience or disobedience to his authority. These three reformed critical realism components are as follows:

- First, the *a priori* commitment to commencing any discussion from a declared Christian worldview position.
- Second, the commitment to the sustainer-creator God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ and in his self-authenticating and infallible written word, the Bible, which declares God’s truth in a wonderful, culturally embracing manner.
- Third, the recognition that we as fallible human beings only grasp a small portion of who God is, and that our understanding of God, his kingdom and his word must be critiqued as the constructs of sinful people and not be mistaken for divine precepts.

***A Priori* commitment to a Christian worldview – the contribution of D H T Vollenhoven**

Every comment reflects a point of view. Whether one is providing a definition or describing science as either a myth or the determiner of truth, one still is presenting a point of view. That point of view is the product of a person’s presuppositions and particular view of reality. There is no neutrality. Even to say that one has no point of view at all about an issue is in itself a point of view. And our point of view, or religious commitment or worldview, determines how we see things, how we explain things, and what we choose to be significant or not significant to any particular conversation.

It is at this point that the thetical-critical method espoused by Vollenhoven becomes significant. Dirk Hendrik Theodoor Vollenhoven (1892-1978) was a Dutch Christian who was influenced by great thinkers such as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck — and probably by contact with his university colleague and younger brother-in-law Herman Dooyeweerd. Although his thinking has only recently begun to be explored in the English-speaking world, it provides strategic philosophical support for reformed critical realism. Vollenhoven claimed that Christians should start their thinking from a deliberate commitment to genuine scripture-based thinking. To commence from a synthesis of components taken from various strands of pagan thinking is to attempt the impossible because it will result in the corruption of biblical truth.

A clever little piece posted by Pontificator (2004) puts it this way:

If our presuppositions automatically preclude us from saying, for example, that Jesus could not have understood himself as the divine Son of God, we may well be excluding from our reconstruction the single most important fact about the historical Jesus and the interpretive key to understanding his person, words and actions. (p. 2)

The hesitancy of contemporary Christians to humbly but boldly assert the biblical authenticity of their perspective in the public domain has disempowered the Christian church today. Though scholars accept as legitimate their peers expressing perspectives as being from a feminist position, or a socialist position or a postmodern perspective, Christians have been very reticent in claiming a space in the public sphere for a Christian perspective. Instead, we have typically preferred to hide our faith under a dualistic bushel and essentially live life using a pietistic paradigm in the Christian worshiping sanctuary on Sunday and the prevailing secular humanist one in the modern or postmodern faith community of the world around us for the rest of the week. According to Vollenhoven, our cognitive premises must be *reformed* so as to be a reflection or flowering of biblically-shaped perspectives. Kok (1992) reports:

For Vollenhoven the term "reformation" implies first of all a turnabout, a conversion, in one's relation to God and his law, that is, in religion, such that everything, including our theoretical pursuits and educational projects, is seen in relation to God and, hence, as subjected to his will. At the same time, reformation for Vollenhoven also implies the active and ongoing element of reconsideration, revision, and reformulation. (p. 13)

This is not to say that features of secular critical realism or other paradigms will not be found within reformed critical realism. Of course they will—but where this is the case, they will be there not because the reformed critical realist engaged in a potluck derby, but because all truth is God's truth so that the included features are present because an analysis of them confirms their rightful presence within a biblically authentic framework.

The scholarly investigation of Vollenhoven by Albert M. Wolters (1979) demonstrates how, in a remarkably contemporary fashion, Vollenhoven also acknowledged the perspectival character of even scientific enquiry, highlighting the link between the knower and that which is known, thus drawing attention to the contextualised nature of knowledge because of the historical embeddedness of every investigator of reality.

The fidelity of Scripture

Vollenhoven, and reformed critical realists, take the highest view of scripture. All scripture is God-breathed and written by men who lived in real life contexts. This means that an understanding of the context of the Bible helps us to perceive the meaning that God has for us in his word. Whilst we don't need a university degree to understand the Bible, it does not in some disembodied way "speak for itself". Much could be said about this matter, but it is interesting to note in passing that even the Bible itself engages in contextualised commentary on the stories it contains. For example, in chapter 4 of his book, the apostle John tells the story of Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan woman. Well aware that many of his readers would be Gentiles, John is careful to insert a contextual comment about Jews not having dealings with Samaritans, just in case Gentile readers misunderstood the significance and cultural context of the event.

The laudable but mistaken stance of modernist literalism in approaching the Bible and presupposing that it is context-less and speaks for itself in an objective way, is an example of naïve realism. The theological version of naïve realism refuses to accept the real time and place setting of the Bible and can lead to a simplistic and distorted understanding of God's Word. The misunderstanding by naïve realists of the biblical concept of knowing, or their quandary about which of the various divergent forms of government that are presented in the biblical drama is the godly one (they all are contextualised forms that are faithful responses to core biblical norms) are two examples. This naïve realist stance is rejected by reformed critical realists.

Reformed critical realists also reject postmodern approaches to the Bible. Postmodernists are often relativist social reconstructionists. They claim that the Bible is the thoughtful reconstruction of history by men who shaped their biblical storytelling to validate their preconceived views about God. Thus passages such as the virgin birth and the resurrection of Christ are dismissed as fanciful inventions by men who rewrote history to serve their own ends. It is in this area that the huge differences become obvious between reformed critical realists who actually believe the Bible, and liberals like Peacocke and Holloway who claim a critical realist stance but who in reality emasculate and mythologise scripture.

Reformed critical realists acknowledge that not only the Bible writers, but also we the 21st century readers, live in particular cultural and finite settings. Therefore, while we must be emphatic about the authority of scripture, we should be careful to understand it in its context and should be much less dogmatic about the accuracy of our interpretations of it in contemporary society. Craig Keener's (1993) persuasive introductory essay to the IVP New Testament Historical Commentary is incisive in its

clarity on this issue of the infallibility yet contextualised nature of the Bible. Duncan Roper's (2004) insights concerning norms and rules in the Bible are also very useful in this regard.

God did not ignore his world when sin entered it through Adam and subsequently impacted all of creation. He turned towards it in love and set out to restore it to himself through the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus his son. Consequently all of life (including the life of the mind) needs now to be lived in the light of the wonderful metanarrative of the Bible.

The finiteness of human knowing

In contrast to God's infinite wisdom and knowledge, the perspectives that we have as humans on thinking and the world are always finite and subject to error. God's comment (Jer 17:9) about the deceitfulness of the human heart, and the Psalmist's reflection on this same thought (Psalm 139: 23-24) also remind us of the frailty of our own perceptions. Nevertheless, with the aid of the Holy Spirit to help us to understand the Bible as we read it in all its glorious fullness, we can live confidently and expectantly, yet humbly and open to correction, as we seek to take our place in God's grand kingdom story.

We affirm that there are God-created truths and certainties in the universe which are revealed in God's word. We will stand our ground and declare the true truths (to use Schaeffer's term) of scripture, many of which are re-expressed in the great historical creeds of the faith. The fact that the miraculous stories of the Bible are beyond scientific explanation does not tempt us to deny their time and place reality. Once again, we join with David (Psalm 139:6) in celebrating these extraordinary demonstrations of God's authority over his world – such knowledge is almost too wonderful; it is too lofty for us to attain. At the same time we also remember that the mundane and ordinary things of life also only occur because of God's sustaining hand. But we recognise that we perceive God's truth and certainties through our own culturally and socially affected spectacles. As reformed critical realists we therefore believe that all human knowledge should be held up as in some way incomplete and tentative despite the fact that we accept the need to live in the light of that knowledge.

According to Don Carson (2001), quoting Stanton Jones, as critical realists

we believe there is a real world out there where it is possible to know and to know truly (hence realism), but we also believe that our theories and hypotheses about that world, and our religious presuppositions and beliefs about reality, color and shape our capacity to know that world (hence critical realism). (p. 14)

Carson, confessing that this stance of (reformed) critical realism is the paradigm that best encapsulates his own position, affirms that “no truth which human beings

may articulate can ever be articulated in a culture-transcending way—but that does not mean that the truth thus articulated does not transcend culture” (p. 15).

Reformed critical realism celebrates the empowerment of Christians to revel in the authority of the Scriptures in a way that is liberated from the bondage of the unwarranted idolatrous positivism of modernism (naïve realism) on the one hand, and the individualistic uncertainty of postmodernism (non-realism) on the other. As Paul said (2 Tim 1:12): “I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.”

Paul himself, right from within the pages of Scripture, provides us with a good example of reformed critical realism. Constantly in his travels and letters, he unpacked the story of Jesus and the resurrection by explaining the continuity of God’s salvation history through the Old Testament and into the New. Paul continually reflected on the enculturated nature of God’s dealing with humankind throughout history and into the post-ascension period. This did not weaken Paul’s message. Rather, it strengthened it. With fervent apostolic authority he was unswerving on matters central to the faith and called for a similar commitment from his fellow believers. However, on matters about which the Bible did not seem to speak clearly, although Paul advocated a particular position, he acknowledged individual conscience concerning these “disputable matters” (Romans 14). His basic contention was that in these contextually important but non-central issues such as whether or not it was acceptable for Christians to eat food offered to idols, there needed to be plurality of practice and a liberty of individual conscience before God – as long as the believers concerned had wrestled with the matter at hand and were ready to give a biblically consistent answer for the choices that they made.

Conclusion

Perhaps two stories might help illustrate the distinctives of each of the three forms of realism (naïve realism, critical realism, and non-realism) mentioned here. It is vital that we be able to make these distinctions as many fine Christians seemed trapped in the bypath meadow of naïve realism. Their transition to critical realism would allow them to both value the heritage of the Reformation and live in the light of a renewed and godly understanding of what the Bible actually is and says.

Parable of the umpires

Many writers, such as Carson (2001) and Jaichandran & Madhav (2003) have used Walter Truett Anderson’s (1990) parable of the three umpires as a helpful handle for understanding critical realism’s place in the continuum from naïve realism (similar to modernism) to non-realism (similar to postmodernity). The story goes like this:

An old joke about three umpires summarizes the range of viewpoints. They are sitting around over a beer, and one says, “There’s balls and there’s strikes, and I call them the way they are.” Another says, “There’s balls and there’s

strikes, and I call 'em the way I see 'em." The third says, "There's balls and there's strikes, and they ain't nothin' until I call 'em." (p. 19)

The first umpire is a naïve realist. His way of seeing is correct and there is no other way to see it. The second umpire is a critical realist. He recognises that others might view the situation differently, but he's the umpire and he will make the call to the best of his ability. The third umpire is a non-realist. Everything is as nothing until he gives it meaning. Although this story is helpful, readers should remember that the critical realism that it describes does not embody all of the core concepts of the thetical-critical method (it does not have an overt Christian presuppositional foundation) so that it still does not fully equate with the Christian position of reformed critical realism.

Parable of the three jumpers

The second story is a parable about three men standing before God. God tells all three of them to jump. The naïve realist asks "How high?" The non-realist says "Why do I have to do what you tell me?" The reformed critical realist says "Yes Lord, but do you mean "Jump over", "Jump up", "Jump down", or "Jump around?" In this story, the naïve realist immediately assumes that he has understood the question in the only way it can be understood. The problem is that if God was really asking the naïve realist to jump down or jump over, then his jumping up would actually be an act of disobedience. The non-realist is uncertain about whether or not anyone has the right to arbitrarily demand that he jump, so he is left in an inactive, questioning quandary. The reformed critical realist, like the naïve realist, recognises God's authority and is keen to jump. However he is uncertain that he adequately understands what is being asked of him so he seeks to know more before he acts, so that he can obediently jump the way God is wanting.

Perhaps one final way of demonstrating the distinctives of the three types of realism is to show the difference between them in a chart. David Naugle (2003) at Dallas Baptist University has constructed just such a table, an amended version of which is reproduced below.

Category	Naïve Realism or Literal Realism	Critical Realism	Non-Realism
Description	Certain Certainty	Certain Certainty Certain Uncertainty	Certain Uncertainty
Umpire Illustration	"I call 'em as they are"	"I call 'em as I see 'em"	"They ain't notin' till I call em."
Response to God's command to Jump	"How High?"	"Tell me what sort of jumping and I'll gladly do it."	"What right have you got to tell me to jump?"
What can we know?	Everything	Something	Nothing

Psychological Stance	Idealism	Realism	Pessimism
Ethical Stance	Confident, Arrogant, Contentious	Assured, Humble, Modest. Fallible	Cynical, Skeptical, Despairing
Theological Stance	Pharisaism	Pauline (“We see through a glass darkly”) 1 Cor 13:12	Ecclesiastes
Worldview Stance	Modernism, Scientism, Naturalism, Foundationalism	Premodern, Christian theism	Postmodernism, Nihilism
Rational Stance	Too much confidence in science and autonomous human reason	Recognition of what reason can and cannot do	Too little confidence in divinely lead human reason
Philosophical Stance	Dogmatism	Realism	Skepticism, Sophistry

Though all are faith commitments, reformed critical realism is unlike secular critical realism or liberal theological critical realism. Reformed critical realism is the application of Vollenhoven’s thetical-critical perspective. It declares that all of life is lived out by human beings either in obedience or disobedience to God’s laws. Reformed critical realists are very aware of the danger that their tradition might be used by some as an excuse for abusing scripture in service of their own selfish ends. However, reformed critical realism remains an avowedly Christian paradigm. It acknowledges the foundational authority of the creator-sustainer God over every aspect of His creation, including people and their intellectual processes.

Despite the idolatrous view of science reflected by Caldwell in the quotation earlier in this paper, his delightful welcome of critical realism onto the stage of human ideas should come as no surprise, given the fundamental bankruptcy of the other alternatives. Along with Carson, and others, we maintain that a reformed concept of critical realism provides a startlingly different and biblically authentic alternative to modernity’s naïve realism and postmodernity’s non-realism. Reformed critical realists recognise that while God’s perfect ways are higher than our ways and his thoughts higher than our thoughts, we as sinful but redeemed image bearers of God, guided by God’s word, can live joyful lives of service and worship, humbly celebrating the Lordship of Christ in everything.

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