Realism and moral being

Andrew Collier, 1944–2014

Andrew Collier, who died on 3 July after more than a decade living with cancer, was a member of the *Radical Philosophy* editorial collective during the 1990s and a long-standing contributor to the journal. Born in Edmonton, North London, towards the end of World War II, he attended Bedford College, University of London (later to be merged, in 1985, with Royal Holloway), where his tutors included Hide Ishiguro and David Wiggins. He went on to teach philosophy at the universities of Warwick, Sussex and then Bangor (1973–89), where, when the department closed, he was transferred to the University of Southampton and subsequently promoted to Professor.

Bangor was in the frontline of the first wave of government attacks on philosophy departments in Britain, during the Thatcher years of the mid-1980s. Its closure was presented not as a 'cost-cutting' measure, but as part of a policy of 'rationalization' – aimed at larger but fewer departments – promulgated then by the University Grants Committee, but still very much with us, in a more directly market-based form today. The continuity of this process over a thirty-year period is perhaps inadequately appreciated. As Andrew reported in his News item in *RP* 46, Summer 1987 ('Appeasing the UGC: The Threat to Philosophy at Bangor'), he 'found out several important facts' about his own future only from the local press and, crucially, a retired porter in the pub. On confronting one of those responsible, he was told that this was something he wasn't supposed to know about. A story of our times.

Andrew was a member of the *RP* collective for eight years (1992–99), helping to edit thirty-seven issues of the journal (61 to 97). But his contributions date further back by two decades, to the early years, beginning with his article 'Truth and Practice' in *RP* 5 (Summer 1973). This was quickly followed by 'The Production of Moral Ideology' (*RP* 9), 'Freedom as the Efficacy of Knowledge' (*RP* 18) and 'In Defence of Epistemology' (*RP* 20), leading up to 'Scientific Realism and the Human World: The Case of Psycho-analysis' (*RP* 29, Autumn 1981), in which an abiding epistemological interest in psycho-analysis – first aired in his book *R.D. Laing: The Philosophy and Politics of Psychotherapy* (1977), reviewed by Ian Craib in *RP* 20 – combined with the main theme that would preoccupy him for the next thirty years: realism.

Andrew was steadfast in his maintenance of the concept of scientific socialism (*Socialist Reasoning: An Inquiry into the Political Philosophy of Scientific Socialism*, Pluto, 1987) and his criticism of intellectual fashions – although critical realism had its own moments, of course, both before and after Bhaskar's surprising turn to religion. Andrew was already there and played a full part, with three books between 2001 and 2004 defending the truth-claims of Christianity. But as John O'Neill points out in his tribute, forthcoming in the *Journal of Critical Realism*, Andrew was far from lacking humour, or appreciating the pleasures of everyday life. Kate Soper's description, an 'unusual blend of moral integrity and anti-puritanism', captures him well: a socialist philosopher from the 1960s (he attended the famous 1967 Dialectics of Liberation conference in London), holding consistently to his principles, in a world that increasingly pushed the horizon of his politics back towards moral being.
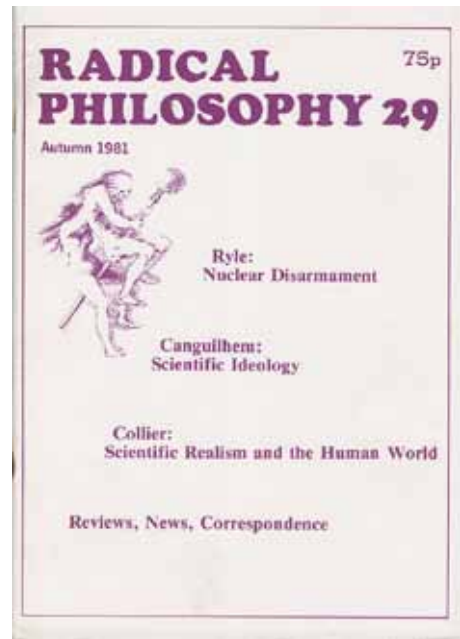
PO

Andrew Collier's contribution to realist philosophy and social theory can perhaps best be summed up in the title of one of his chapters in the collection *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, edited by Andrew himself along with Margaret Archer, Roy Bhaskar, Tony Lawson and Alan Norrie and published in 1998. The title is 'Explanation and Emancipation', and it can be argued that Andrew gave a unique focus to both, and of course to their conjunction. First, there was his stress on the natural world and environmental issues, shared with Ted Benton. It was brought to bear by both of them in their conversations with Roy Bhaskar in the late 1980s, as described by Bhaskar in his chapter in the Festschrift for Andrew, *Defending Objectivity*, edited by Margaret Archer and myself (2004) – hastily assembled after he was given only six months to live in 2003. Bhaskar had emphasized ontological depth and the stratification of reality in his earlier work, but Andrew and Ted opened up what, at least for me, and possibly also for Roy, were new dimensions of the analysis of the inter-relations of (to put it simplistically) the natural and the social.

A realist conception of explanation, in other words, had not only to be philosophically persuasive and to include a broadly Marxist, or, more loosely, pragmatist conception of the place of philosophy in human practice, but also to take full account of the world as it is in itself and not only 'for humans'. For Andrew, though we were not aware of it at the time, there was also a religious dimension, present in our conversations in his impressively wide knowledge of medieval Christian philosophy.

The second theme, emancipation, had been stressed by Roy Bhaskar in his 1986 *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation*, but again Andrew gave it an explicitly socialist spin in his 1988 book *Scientific Realism and Socialist Thought.* While his book *Critical Realism: An Introduction to Roy Bhaskar's Philosophy* (1994) remains a fundamental source of arguments, *Being and Worth* (1999) extended realism to ethics, with the Augustinian claim that all being has an intrinsic worth – a conclusion with implications 'both for environmental ethics – that natural beings should be valued for themselves, not just for their use to us – and for justice in the human world, based on the idea that humans are unique and equal in respect of "having a life to live"'.

As Andrew wrote:

> I have been defending a completely general thesis about being: that being as being is good (Augustine), or as the medievals put it, that the terms 'being' and 'good' are convertible. One consequence of this is that beings apart from human beings have intrinsic worth, and this is the consequence that goes against the grain of all post-medieval philosophy apart from recent ecophilosophy... But of course the Augustinian position that I am defending includes the idea that human beings have intrinsic worth, and indeed more intrinsic worth than other natural entities. I am proposing the worth of being as the 'intransitive dimension' of the whole of ethics, which every moral code approximates to more or less well, and under the constraints of its time-and-place-bound ideological determinants. One can be 'relativist' about concrete moral codes and theories, in the sense that Roy Bhaskar calls our scientific knowledge at any given place and time 'relative'. Yet just as scientific knowledge aims to discover a reality independent of it, and can therefore be more or less rational in its judgements, so moral codes and theories are shots at discovering real worth, and can be more or less rational as they do so better or worse. (p. 90)

This position is, I think, a stunningly original and challenging approach to ethical questions, which has received much less attention than it deserves.

William Outhwaite