

Suggested citation: Fryer, Tom & Navarrete, Cristián (2022) *Let's stop talking about the three domains of reality*, Critical Realist Network, <https://criticalrealismnetwork.org/2022/04/26/stop-talking-about-the-three-domains/>

Let's stop talking about the three domains of reality

By Tom Fryer and Cristián Navarrete

Introduction

Let's stop talking about the three domains of reality.

Controversial stuff, we know. Hear us out though. We really do think we'd be in a better place if we scrapped the idea.

Let's start at the very beginning, a very good place to start. The idea that there's three domains of reality (the empirical, actual and real) is obviously one of critical realism's most central conclusions,¹ and one that Roy Bhaskar outlines early in Realist Theory of Science (RTS).

Defining the three domains of reality, adapted from Bhaskar (2008, p.13 & p.56)

	Domain of real	Domain of actual	Domain of empirical
Causal mechanisms	✓		
Events	✓	✓	
Experiences	✓	✓	✓

When we're explaining critical realism to other people, the three domains are one of the first things we mention. How many of us have said something like:

"Okay, so as the name kinda suggests critical realism is a realist theory, and specifically it says there's three domains of reality."

It's almost become a habit for many of us to talk this way—it's how we first learnt about critical realism, it's how we see people write about critical realism, and it's how we've taught others about critical realism. It's just the way things are done.

Well, we think the time has come to look at this habit with a more critical eye.

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We're going to argue that we should stop talking about the three domains of reality because 1) they're redundant, 2) they're too damn confusing and 3) we've got no reason to think they exist. We hope you'll find our argument playful but provocative—at the very least it's a chance to think about a core bit of critical realism, and who doesn't want to do that with the companionship of a hot drink?²

Argument 1: The three domains of reality are redundant

If you already have the concepts of *experiences* (the perceptions of things by agents), *events* (the things that are being perceived) and *causal mechanisms* (the things that tend to produce the events),³ then the three domains of reality are redundant. They don't add much (or anything) to our understanding of the world.

If we know the difference between experiences, events and causal mechanisms then we're already in a pretty good position to go and do scientific research in a vaguely coherent way. The concepts allow us to understand what our data is (often agents' experiences of events), and what we should be aiming to do (offer explanations of how causal mechanisms bring about the events and experiences). It stops us falling into the trap of focussing on what we can measure and observe (experiences), and keeps us on the task of finding the underlying causal mechanisms.

For a scientific researcher that understands the differences between *experiences*, *events* and *causal mechanisms* we can't see any extra insights that come from adding the three domains of reality. They're redundant.

Argument 2: The three domains of reality are too damn confusing

It's also way simpler to talk about experiences, events and causal mechanisms compared with the three domains of reality. After all, you can't explain the three domains of reality without firstly introducing experiences, events and causal mechanisms—that's exactly what the table above from RTS is trying to do.

This is definitely anecdotal, but in our experience people tend to find experiences, events and causal mechanisms reasonably easy to grasp. The idea that there are *experiences* (the perceptions of things by agents), *events* (the things that are being perceived) and *causal mechanisms* (the things that tend to produce the events) is often accepted as pretty intuitive.

It's the opposite for the three domains of reality. We're constantly faced with people saying: "I get most of this critical realism stuff, but if I'm being totally honest, I'm a bit bamboozled by that three domains of reality bit". People are often pretty confused about how to apply them in their research: "So, imagine I'm doing my research, how do I know which domain I'm looking at... like, say I've interviewed someone about their experience... experiences are

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in all three domains, so am I in the empirical, actual or real? I don't get it". Or, people get stuck on the way the domains are conceptualised: "Why are events and experiences in the domain of the actual, and not just events – in fact, why are the domains overlapping at all?".

Maybe this all stems from the fact that we don't like the three domains. Maybe because we don't really like (or understand) them, this means we teach the concepts badly. But maybe, just maybe, people are onto something here. Maybe we don't really need the three domains of reality.

If people find experiences, events and causal mechanisms relatively straight forward, why not just roll with this? Why risk muddying the water, especially if the three domains don't add much to our understanding of the world?

We should be trying to give the most accessible accounts of critical realism, to benefit all researchers. Not to do this just puts up barriers—it's gatekeeping.

Argument 3: the three domains of reality don't even exist

We think that the case against the three domains already holds based on our first two points, but we want to make a third argument to ramp up the controversy. This is meant to be a little provocative after all.

Okay, so we're going to make the case that we've got no reason to think that the three domains of reality exist.

Let's be clear: we do think that reality consists of experiences, events and causal mechanisms as Bhaskar outlines them in RTS, but we don't think there's three overlapping domains of reality.

This is a bit more of a philosophical argument, and to understand it we need to revisit RTS and the reason we can be confident that critical realism gives a decent ontological account of the world. Our confidence in critical realism's conclusions comes from working out what the world must be like for scientific experiments to be possible (this is Bhaskar's main project in RTS). It's this retroductive reasoning that holds much of critical realism's power.

Now, it's perfectly possible to explain why experiments have a special place in knowledge production without mentioning the three domains. With the distinctions that Bhaskar makes between experiences, events and causal mechanisms, we're already in a position to say something like: *scientific experiments have a special role to play in knowledge production because they allow us to understand how causal mechanisms operate. They do this by creating a closed environment in which only one causal mechanism acts to bring about an event, thus giving us unique insights into the nature of that causal mechanism.*⁴

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Bhaskar does go on to offer an alternative explanation for why scientific experiments are important for knowledge production using the three domains—he talks about experiments being important because they are an instance when the three domains are aligned or in-phase. However, Bhaskar doesn't make the case that this is a better argument or that this argument adds anything to the previous explanation that uses the concepts of experiences, events and causal mechanisms.

So, if we can understand the possibility of scientific experiment without the three domains of reality, this leads to a really important conclusion: it means we've no reason to think that the world actually is divided into the three domains. If the three domains are unnecessary to explain scientific experiment, then we're left with no reason to think that the three domains of reality exist.

A counter argument: it's all real

Before we wrap up, it's worth mentioning a potential counter-argument to all of this. Someone might say:

"Sure, I agree with most of what you've said so far. But, the three domains of reality helps us to understand the relationship between experiences, events and causal mechanisms. They show us that experiences, events and causal mechanisms are in the domain of the real, which means that they're all part of reality. That's why we need the three domains of reality, and that's why we can have confidence that the world really is divided up into three domains."

Lovely stuff. This counter argument more or less resembles how Bhaskar develops his argument in RTS—he does seem to introduce the three domains of reality to try and clarify the relationship between experiences, events and causal mechanisms. More specifically, he wants to think of the three domains of reality as overlapping because of a desire to show that *experiences, events and causal mechanisms are all part of reality*.

So, if we scrap the three domains of reality, do we lose this idea that experiences, events and causal mechanisms are all part of reality?

We don't think so.

Here's our radical alternative: just clearly state that *'experiences, events and causal mechanisms are all part of reality'*.

It's as simple as that.

Job done.

Think about this slightly daft example. Imagine we're talking about the domains of an orange. As in the fruit. We might say that there's three domains of an orange: the domain of

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the juicy bit, the domain of the white bitter bit, and the domain of the zesty peely bit. All together they make an orange. We don't need to define one of the domains as the 'domain of the orange' to understand that the juicy bit, the white bitter bit, and the zesty peely bit are all part of the orange. It's kinda obvious.

For anyone at the back we could spell out: '*the juicy bit, the white bitter bit, and the zesty peely bit are part of the orange*'. But that's all there is to it.

In the same way, if the sole purpose of the three domains of reality is to help us see that experiences, events and causal mechanisms are all part of reality then we can achieve this by just saying: '*Oi mate, listen up will ya, experiences, events and causal mechanisms are all part of reality*'.

Bish-bash-bosh.

There's no need for a complex concept like the three overlapping domains of reality to make this simple point.

Conclusion

We've tried to make the case that we should stop talking about the three domains of reality because:

1. They're redundant for researchers that already understand Bhaskar's concepts of *experiences, events* and *causal mechanisms*.
2. It's simpler and more intuitive to teach people about *experiences, events* and *causal mechanisms*.
3. They aren't needed to show the possibility of scientific experiment, which means we've no reason to think that the three domains even exist.

Thanks for taking the time to read this. We hope it's prompted you to think about a core critical realist conclusion, one that we often mention right at the beginning of our discussions about critical realism, but also one that you might not have thought about for a while.

We'd love to hear any of your thoughts on this! To this end, we thought it might be a good idea to end with a few questions:

- Do you agree with us that we don't need the three domains of reality? Or have we missed something silly?
- If we dropped the three domains of reality would we lose something from our ontological theory or would it make our social science research worse?
- We've argued that the three domains of reality don't help us to understand the relationship between experiences, events and causal mechanisms. Is it possible to make the further argument that the domains of reality make a mistake: how could reality contain the domain of the real, when the two are synonymous? In other words, is it possible for a totality to be defined as equal to one of its subsets?

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- Assuming we're absolutely right about absolutely everything because we're absolutely amazing (unlikely, we know...), do we need something more than the three concepts (experiences, events and causal mechanisms) to replace the three domains? What are these additional concepts?

Notes

1. We take the three domains of reality to be the domains of the empirical, actual and real, as Bhaskar outlined in RTS (2008, p.56). This ignores the way Bhaskar developed the domain of the empirical into the domain of the subjective in his later work, and it also ignores proposals from people such as Nellhaus (1998), Elder-Vass (2004) and Holland (2019) who have proposed modifications to the domains of reality. We do this for two reasons. First, simplicity. We are aiming to stimulate debate on the usefulness and relevance of the three domains of reality—and want to make this argument as accessible as possible to the greatest number of people. Secondly, we feel that none of the developments avoid our arguments, and so it felt unnecessary to add this extra complexity.
2. Hot drink not included.
3. In this piece, our aim is to provoke discussions about the three domains of reality rather than provide a robust alternative. We're assuming that Bhaskar's existing definitions of experiences, events and mechanisms are more or less right, and that the domains of reality don't add much to this. Our argument shouldn't be interpreted as a claim that reality only consists of experiences, events and causal mechanisms, or the claim that these are the only ontological concepts we need. A robust ontology will involve several other concepts, such as *powers* or *tendencies*, to name but two.
4. We're not making a radical point here. Bhaskar makes this exact argument in RTS (2008, pp.33-35) before he gets around to introducing the three domains of reality in the main text (2008, p.56). He already uses experiences, events and causal mechanisms to explain why scientific experiments are important to knowledge production, without any need for the three domains of reality.

We would like to thank Jack Newman, Mark Carrigan and Mauricio Quilpatay for their very helpful comments and critiques while drafting this piece.

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