

There are three domains - just not exactly Bhaskar's

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In a recent post, Tom Fryer and Cristián Navarrete (2022) argued that “domains” talk is confusing and redundant (the terms mechanisms, events and experiences are sufficient), and that domains don't even exist since everything is real. In response, Dave Elder-Vass wrote a blog post (2022) contending that we should absorb the domain of the empirical into the domain of the actual, but keep the distinction between the real and the actual. I will argue instead that there are considerable reasons to preserve both the concept of domains and a third ontological domain.

First, though, I agree with Dave that we must preserve the real and actual domains. The distinction is a vital element in critical realism. I'm less persuaded by his proposal to call merely latent powers “the potential,” since the word “latent” suffices, and for various reasons I would rather rename the entire domain from “the real” to “the potential.” But the matter isn't significant here, so I will continue to use “the real.” However, I will urge a fundamental amendment to “the empirical.”

To the main issue, then: the proposed elimination of the actual/empirical distinction. One of my concerns is that the metaphor of “domains,” sometimes described as “levels,” obscures an important point. Reexamine Bhaskar's famed table of the domains (Bhaskar 1978: 13, 56; reproduced as Dave's Figure 1). As we all know, it distinguishes between the real, the actual, and the empirical in a qualitative manner—but crucially, it doesn't present them as separated layers of a birthday cake: they are (also) subsets. The domain of the actual is part of (included within) the real, and the empirical is part of the actual, and thus also real. This is especially clear at his “experiences” level: experiences are real and actual and empirical, rather than just one of them. (Bhaskar shorthands this as $d_r > d_a > d_e$ in *Dialectic* [1993: 207].) The metaphor for Bhaskar's ontology is more like a wedding cake: layers if you look from the side, concentric circles if you look from above.

Bhasker's use of subsets obviates one of the arguments against the three-domain theory, because his ontology already incorporates Dave's key claim. We can watch Bhaskar's concept of the empirical as a subset vanish when Dave moves from an off-hand mention that for Bhaskar, “the empirical is a subset of the actual,” to a far more forceful statement that the actual/empirical distinction itself “is problematic as a distinction between ontological domains, because my experience is itself also an event,” on which he bases much of his subsequent argument that “the empirical” is merely an expository device. For Dave, experiences are just

one type of event among myriads of others. For Tom and Cristián, everything is real, a point which of course is already in Bhaskar's theory.

However, recognizing that Bhaskar's ontology involves subsets doesn't by itself mean you can't fully collapse or absorb the empirical into the actual; all it tells us is that in Bhaskar's view, the empirical in fact is already within the actual. What's really at stake, as Dave correctly observes, is the rationale for differentiating the two sets to the point that the empirical even constitutes a domain. To anticipate a bit, I contend that Bhaskar's approach is indeed faulty: nevertheless some such ontological domain is crucial for critical realism, even if his version is ill-conceived.

Dave acknowledges its awkwardness and attempts to rescue the empirical from anthropocentrism by arguing that in *A Realist Theory of Science*, Bhaskar was specifically thinking about science, paradigmatically the natural sciences. Which is true: Bhaskar only turns to the social sciences in *The Possibility of Naturalism*. But there he merely reiterates his concept of the domains (Bhaskar 1989: 15). He doesn't even reconsider it in *Dialectic*, where he reframes pretty much everything. His empirical domain is anthropocentric, full stop. That's indeed a dubious basis for establishing a whole ontological domain!

Still, the two-domain thesis faces an important problem: how does it account for varying interpretations of natural phenomena? "The sun revolves around the earth" and "The earth revolves around the sun" are both interpretations of a particular recurring event. Some people still even claim the earth is flat. The validity of these theories is not the question, only that they interpret the same thing differently. How do differing views not become conventionalist mere and equally valid interpretations? How can collapsing the empirical into the actual contend with these difficulties? Are different interpretations simply different synaptic firings? How can that possibly be if everyone's brains differ and thus different synapses are involved—yet all English speakers understand the words "The earth is round" more or less identically, and they mean nothing to people who have never encountered English. In short, where do we locate meaning? Can the mind really be reduced to the brain?

For critical realism this is no small matter—it is tied to several other arguments. One of Bhaskar's major theses is his distinction between the intransitive and transitive dimensions of studying reality (the conduct of science, historiography, psychotherapy, etc.). The intransitive dimension (ID) consists of the objects that we examine, as they exist independent of our thoughts about them; the transitive dimension (TD) is our thinking about these objects, an activity that involves the entire material, social and cultural infrastructure behind research (preexisting views, technology, funding sources, attitudes, gender discrimination, etc.). At root, however, it is the distinction between ontology and epistemology—the foundation of realism. Conversely, conflating being into our knowledge of being is the definition of the epistemic fallacy. The TD/ID distinction also implies that thoughts about real entities—interpretations of it—can vary: a single object in the ID can be understood variously in the TD.

Notice that the TD/ID distinction does not mean mental vs extramental, respectively: we can think about (TD) our own thoughts (ID). (Translating TD/ID into mental/extramental is handy, but imprecise.) One way Bhaskar puts this is by saying epistemology is contained within

ontology, in the sense that thought is real. Let's dwell on that a moment. It upholds the containment or subset series of the domains, as discussed earlier. But it also insists that ideas are real. The latter point is the essence of a crucial argument in *The Possibility of Naturalism*: reasons can be causes, which is absolutely necessary to uphold agency. Since thoughts have causal powers, they are real entities, even though particular thoughts may or may not result in actions. The opposite claim—that thoughts are unreal—is a standard empiricist position.

The transitive dimension is closely related to part of Bhaskar's "holy trinity" of critical realism: ontological realism, epistemic relativism, and judgmental rationalism. Epistemic relativism pertains to the fact that all knowledge is sociohistorically produced, and we always recognize objects under some description rather than through some sort of purely objective and direct contact with it. I get the impression that critical realist research persistently under- or outright unrecognizes epistemic relativity, and the erasure of a third ontological domain recapitulates that problem.

As you can see, I've moved quite a bit past "the empirical," which is just one type of meaning, thought, or experience. I will go still farther by pointing out that, for example, many non-human creatures have (in some sense) a concept of numbers, which implies that we need to account for something wider than human beings and is thus potentially non-anthropocentric. Indeed, even the word "meaning" is dodgy and anthropomorphic, though I'll continue to use it for a while.

The two-domain thesis fails to account for meaning as a special sort of actuality. But, one might counter, no matter how convincing my arguments that thought is special among all the events in the domain of the actual and that it plays crucial roles in critical realist theory, I still haven't fully justified the claim that it constitutes a distinctive ontological domain. I will show that we do have to establish some such domain, akin to Bhaskar's but also quite different: meaning. It is of course actual and real, per my discussion above.

To achieve that justification, I must return to a point on which we already agree: there is a valid distinction between the domains of the real and the actual. The domain of the real consists of the transfactual existence of causal (and thus real) powers and mechanisms, and the actual emerges from the interactions among those powers and mechanisms. These interactions within the actual can even produce new powers and mechanisms within the real that can be neither reduced to nor deduced from their constituents. A simple example is the interaction of hydrogen atoms with oxygen atoms that produces water, which has characteristics irreducible to its constituent atoms. A far more sophisticated instance is DNA, which consists of a structure of elements underlying startling new power: life. Among other things, living beings can act back upon denizens of the physical world, such as by consuming gases and minerals, through which they maintain their existence and reproduce themselves. But the development of new powers and mechanisms isn't the only thing that creates new realities: for instance, if an asteroid larger than the one that killed the dinosaurs were hurtling toward the sun, the result within the real domain would be quite different if the earth were directly in between than elsewhere. No new power would arise, just a new but real situation, with real consequences for future events.

Thus when powers and mechanisms (within the domain of the real) interact (domain of the actual), the result is a new reality affecting future interactions, even if it can be fully predicted from the components' powers. The process through which interactions between real entities produces actualities with consequences affecting reality is called emergence. In other words, the nature of the difference between the domains of the real and the actual—the criterion explaining the ontological distinction between them—is emergence itself.

The very same criterion justifies distinguishing the domain of meaning from the domain of the actual: meaning is emergent from the innumerable events that occur (including ones in brains).

In particular, it consists of a wholly new order of power altogether, because meaning is not physical. Its lack of physicality is why empiricism calls thoughts “unreal.” Meaning requires a physical substratum, such as neurons, but the power isn't itself physical and can't be reduced to synaptic firings. Its materiality, so to speak, consists of relationality. Nonetheless, because it's a power, meaning is real. It can act upon actualities, such as by becoming the reasons for an agent's activity. There can even be “mind over matter,” through neuroplasticity. One of meaning's possible actions, namely the effort to understand actualities, in fact comprises the transitive dimension, and this activity can occur in various ways, resulting in divergent interpretations of the entities constituting the intransitive dimension. Emergence is the condition of possibility for varying interpretations of actual events, forestalls the reduction of thought into brain matter, and prevents the domain's absorption into the actual.

To my knowledge Bhaskar connected domains to emergence only in passing and only with regard to the real and the actual (1993: 237) and he used the concept primarily for entities (1993: 49-56). But that's unimportant: the concept of emergence does justify the concept of domains. Thus contra Tom and Cristián's case for speaking solely of concrete mechanisms, events and experiences, which is fine for non-philosophical and introductory conversations, within critical realist philosophy the term “domains” reflects important ontological differences. The emergence of real powers, mechanisms and entities (e.g., quarks to atoms to molecules to life forms etc.) is ontic; the emergence of domains is ontological.

Finally, in a move that among other things permits non-human beings to possess something akin to concepts, indeed fully de-anthropomorphizes the domain, I reconceptualize the domain of “meaning” as the domain of semiosis, that is, semiotic activity. Thus there exists, for example, the scientific field of biosemiotics. All living beings possess a semiotic system of varying complexity. In humans the system (and its physical substratum) is so sophisticated that it can operate through wholly arbitrary symbols such as language. Its power extends to objects that aren't present or physical—in other words, its referent can be absent (“I can't find my keys!”) or abstract (“systems”), and it can produce a host of non-actual states and entities, including fictions (e.g., Anna Karenina and Wookiees); counterfactuals (“If Hilary Clinton had been elected President instead of Donald Trump, there would have been more liberals on the Supreme Court”); projections of the future (“I'll go to bed early tonight”); impossible (like time travel); and many more. The emergence of semiosis as a non-physical, relational power justifies establishing a new ontological domain within the domains of the actual and the real. Collapsing

the semiotic into the actual is tantamount to conflating being and knowledge of being, and rejecting epistemic relativism. In short, if no domain of semiosis, then no critical realism.

At the technical level, my own (more or less current) theory of the semiotic domain elaborated in Nellhaus 1998 is a slightly modified version of Peirce's semiotics, which has numerous advantages over Saussure's, including a connection to Bhaskar's own theory (1993: 222-23), anti-anthropocentrism, and an additional rationale for considering the semiotic as an ontological domain; but even if one prefers Saussure's semiology (which is restricted to humans), semiosis stands as an ontological domain emergent from within and distinct from the actual, which in turn is emergent from within and distinct from the real.

Against Dave's view that the third domain was merely a rhetorical device for articulating a realist theory of science, and a rather pointless one at that, let me emphasize that Bhaskar's theory is a theory of science—that is, knowledge. His theory rightly focuses on ontology, but its *raison d'être* is epistemology. And knowledge must have a real existence in order to have a content. The nature of that existence is semiotic.

Bhaskar's concept of the empirical domain fails because although the general idea behind ontologically differentiating the "empirical" from the actual is correct, the content of his third domain—experiences—is empiricist. That's really what's wrong with his actual/empirical distinction. As I put it elsewhere (2022), "as long as critical realism shackles an entire ontological domain to 'experience,' it will surreptitiously harbor an actualist, anthropocentric and anthropomorphic ontology."

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