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BRIEF REPORT

A real common ground: A case for confronting agential realism and critical realism

[version 1; peer review: 2 approved with reservations]

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Abstract

Background

This report proposes a preliminary comparison of two contemporary theoretical frameworks, agential realism (AR) and critical realism (CR), for interdisciplinary research. The aim is to explore the potential of combining these frameworks into a new proposal with a specific metaphysical, epistemological, and methodological structure, which is particularly relevant for emotion research in psychology and philosophy.

Methods

The report compares AR and CR examining four key topics: ontology and epistemology; “critical” inspiration and aims; causality; and emotions.

Results

AR proposes a relational ontology in which reality is constituted by phenomena and intra-actions, whereas CR offers a stratified view of reality with three domains: real, actual, and empirical. Both frameworks have emancipatory intent and aim to bridge the gap between social constructivism and realism, though with different approaches. Regarding causality, AR reconceptualizes it through the notion of "apparatus" and causal intra-actions, while CR views causality as pertaining to the ontological level of the real, with mechanisms causing effects in the actual and empirical domains.

Conclusions

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ? ?

	1	2
version 1 23 Feb 2026	? view	? view

1. **P. J. Wall**, Technological University Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

2. **Martin E. H. Willis**, University of East London, London, UK

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

This comparison highlights the potential for creating a bridge between these frameworks to address complex interdisciplinary research questions, particularly in emotion studies. It invites feedback from different disciplines for future work on this topic, aiming to develop a more nuanced approach to understanding human phenomena, such as emotions.

Plain language summary
This report examines two ways of understanding reality that are relevant to research: agential realism and critical realism. It proposes that combining these ideas could help achieve a better understanding of complex topics, particularly in relation to the study of emotions. Agential realism theorizes that everything is connected and interacting, while critical realism proposes that there are different layers of reality, some knowable and some not knowable. Both frameworks want to make the research more inclusive and reliable. The report summarizes how these frameworks view reality, cause-and-effect, and emotions. It suggests that by confronting and eventually bringing these ideas together, we might obtain a clearer picture of how emotions work, considering both biology and society. The goal is to start a conversation between different fields of study and create a new way of conducting research that can handle complicated topics such as emotions. The aim of this report is to invite future research on this topic to better understand human experience.

Keywords
emotion, metaphysics, methodology, realism, critical realism, agential realism, philosophy, psychology



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This brief report proposes a preliminary comparison of two contemporary theoretical frameworks, agential realism and critical realism, to be applied for interdisciplinary research. The objective of this preliminary work is to demonstrate the potential of a philosophical-conceptual operation incorporating two frameworks in a new proposal with its own specific metaphysical, epistemological, and methodological structure for interdisciplinary research. This may be particularly relevant in emotion research, a field shared by psychology and philosophy. The report aims to suggest a research topic and invite feedback from different disciplines for future work.

Critical realism (CR), especially the version widely articulated by Roy Bhaskar, has attracted significant interest across social sciences and psychology research (in this report, CR indicates Bhaskar's version of critical realism, which is the most influential). In these contexts, it has been used as a theoretical framework, as it seems capable of addressing crucial issues faced by researchers in these fields: primarily, to articulate an ontology that meets the need for realism required by a certain way of practicing scientific research (therefore, the existence of a world that is "independent" of subjects must somehow be guaranteed; issue that CR solves with ontological realism); secondly, to respond productively to the postmodern critique of positivism and empiricism, resolving the issues posed by social constructionism and relativism (which requires to recognize the dimension of the social production of knowledge, to which CR responds with epistemological relativism, without questioning ontological realism).

These problems are also crucial to feminist epistemology, which embraces both theoretical demands and effective methodological implementation in research, especially in standpoint theory and new materialism currents. The work of Karen Barad and their theory of agential realism (AR) emerge from this tradition. Instead of separating the ontological and epistemological spheres (as CR does), AR describes and emphasizes their inseparability. This inseparability is expressed by Barad with the neologism "ethico-onto-epistem-ology."

CR and AR (but also feminist epistemology in general) pose similar problems and respond to them with diverse and convergent solutions. Both CR and feminist epistemologies are often adopted in scientific research (unlike what often happens with other philosophical theories). Nevertheless, they are seldom considered in philosophical debates, and when they are, they are certainly not considered together (a notable exception is Flatschart, 2017). Although CR is a theory that has had some success in qualitative research, aims to be a general philosophical theory (and not just limited to a particular science), and proposes fairly complex metaphysics, it remains marginal and little known in debates about realism within philosophy. This determines the difficulty in communication for those involved in philosophy to understand and communicate with those involved in psychology, and vice versa. At the same time, the success of AR in feminist, posthuman, and gender studies debates has not torn down the wall that has traditionally confined feminist philosophy, even the most comprehensive, as in this case, to a marginal position within philosophical institutional research. Therefore, the same lack of communication described concerning critical realism also occurs between non-feminist and feminist philosophers.

TOPIC 1. Ontology and epistemology

As mentioned, agential realism (AR) does not separate the ontological and epistemological domains. AR realism provides a relational ontology (Barad, 2007 p.93): reality is constituted by phenomena, and relationships precede entities; reality is not made up of relationships or, more properly, intra-actions. AR maintains that it is not necessary to conceive the world as made up of objects independent of each other, or essences or entities, to validate the status of "realness," or, in other words, to ground the realness of the world. The ontological precedence of intra-actions over "things" does not mean that there is no reality. AR conceptualize reality by overturning the habitual thought process. Rather than conceiving phenomena by postulating objects and then investigating their relations, AR overturns this reasoning: "Relations do not follow relata, but the other way around." (Barad, 2007 p.137). This means rejecting a conception of the world based on separateness, and instead embracing a relational conception. In this sense, AR metaphysics corresponds to feminist intuitions and epistemological theories centered on ecological principles, with an emphasis on the responsibility that is a necessary condition for a sustainable relation to the world and to our knowledge of it. In AR, knowledge equates to making practices of knowledge, what Barad calls, for example, "making specific worldly configurations": "Making knowledge […] is about making specific worldly configurations [...] in the sense of materially engaging as part of the world in giving it specific material form. (Barad, 2007 p.91)". As can be seen from this brief quotation, although AR offers sophisticated metaphysics that aim to be consistent with the results of the sciences (in particular, those of quantum physics), determining exactly *how* knowledge is configured is a complex issue within the AR framework. Furthermore, understanding how to make AR operational, that is, effectively applicable to research methods that can be used in psychology, for example, is a task that requires a great deal of effort.

Critical realism (CR) proposes an ontology that guarantees the existence of a world "independent" of subjects: *Ontological realism*, combining it with *Epistemological relativism* to recognize the dimension of the social production of knowledge. CR ontology is based on a stratified view of reality, structured in three levels, or "domains": the real, the actual and the empirical. The domain of real (mechanisms), which is the deepest level of reality, consists of the underlying structures, powers, and causal mechanisms. These mechanisms exist independently of human perception and generate events worldwide. The domain of the real is not only the deepest, but also the larger because it also contains mechanisms that are not active or expressed. The domain of actual (events) is the domain of things that actually happen, whether they are observed or not. The domain of empirical (experience) is the level of observation and interpretation of the reality.

In other words, while AR proposes a one-level fundamentally interconnected and interdependent ontology, CR proposes a proliferation of ontological domains organized in a nested structure. A notable challenge inherent in the AR framework pertains to the potential risk of undifferentiation. In contrast, the CR model exhibits an elevated degree of differentiation.

TOPIC 2. What is the "critical" in a realist framework

Both AR and CR have an emancipatory intent, starting from the criticism of previous models to propose a change. Both AR and CR take seriously the issues of identity and society and want to create space for scientific practice in a way that is inclusive and reliable. These emancipatory instances explain the realistic inspirations for AR and CR. Lawson (2020) argues that realist thought is "beneficial to, and is probably indispensable for, any would-be revelatory and emancipatory projects" (2020 in Ingen *et al.*, 2020, p. 18). At the same time, both AR and CR want to "discern which perspective on, or construal of, the world is closer to truth" (Willis, p. 19). CR "offers a middle ground" (Willis, 2022 p.1) between the two poles of social constructivism and realism, or postmodernism and positivism, that have been largely discussed in feminist epistemology (notably, the "two poles" are examined by Haraway 1988). AR instead refutes to occupy a middle ground but nevertheless aims to keep realism and social constructionism together "without contradiction' (Barad, 1996). To understand the scientific and political gains of overcoming the constructionism-realism dichotomy, it is helpful to consider the long chain of dichotomies associated with it and how their critique can serve both emancipatory and knowledge aims. The following tentative list (adapted and integrated from Ingen *et al.* 2020 p. 4) can serve to explore the differences between the critical perspectives of the two frameworks and the possibilities of creating a bridge between them:

Foundationalism/antifoundationalism; positivism/antipositivism; naturalism/antinaturalism; scientific explanation/humanistic understanding; essentialism/antiessentialism; materialism/idealism; objectivism/subjectivism; facts/values (universal/particular, and identity/non-identity lie behind these dichotomies, but may be too wide to be investigated).

TOPIC 3. Causality

Causality is among the most challenging concepts to approach in both AR and CR, if not the most challenging.

The notion of causality must be reconsidered for AR. Rejecting the concept that the world is composed of entities independent of each other determines that the notion of classical or traditional causality cannot be maintained. Classical or traditional causality provides for the existence of a (precisely causal) relationship between two separate entities and, ccording to AR, we cannot accept the existence of individual entities that pre-exist their intra-action; therefore, one cannot cause the other. AR solves this problem by identifying the causally significant node in the "apparatus" ("the larger apparatus", Barad, 2007, p.176). It is the apparatus that "operates" a measurement (or: it is through the apparatus that the measurement is given). For Barad, the notion of measurement is equivalent to that of causal intra-action; that is, measurement is a causal intra-action. However, as can be ascertained from this brief excursus in AR, understanding what a measurement (i.e., a causal intra-action) is and how it works is a demanding task.

CR also considers causality in a distinctive and non-trivial manner. Causality in fact pertains to the ontological level of the real, so that it does not indicate a linear sequence of events. In the domain of the real, there are causes (mechanisms) that affect the domain of the actual and the empirical. As Willis (2022) observes, "This means that there is independence of causal structures and generative mechanisms from the patterns of events they produce" (Willis, 2022, p. 17, my emphasis). The fact that they are at the level of the real also means that the causal mechanisms are not necessarily observable, but when discovered, they manifest a "deeper" ontological structure. Moreover, in CR "All events are multiply determined – no actual event is ever caused by a single cause" (Willis, 2022 p.19). To understand causality, then, and discover the "real" causes of events of the actual, it is not sufficient to observe the chain of experiences in the empirical domain. It is instead necessary to identify the causes at the "deeper" level (the real) via a process called "retroduction" (that is different from retrodiction, see below). Retroduction makes it possible to *explain* the effects observable in the domain of empirical asserting causes that are structural and are placed in the deepest level of reality, while retrodiction is the investigation of "what mix of causal powers interacted in what way to produce any particular event" (Elder-Vass, 2015 p.2). So, retroduction is the inquiry about fundamental mechanisms/laws, retrodiction is the identification of the set of mechanisms and laws that cause a certain event. This means that, to approach the topic of causality in CR, it is necessary to venture into the three ontological levels mentioned and into two articulations of the explanations connected to causality.

TOPIC 4. Emotions

Emotions lie at the intersection of psychological, philosophical, sociological, and medical reflections and are research objects belonging to a space in which our conceptualizations of mind and body, nature and culture, and biology and social dimensions intersect. Understanding emotions from a purely neuroscience or biology perspective leaves out the importance of socialization and discrimination in their development; for example, we may overlook our own bias towards some kind of experience in our research (a notable example of this is that of anger: race, gender, and cultural biases can impact research about anger, e.g., the stereotype of the angry black woman; how anger is differently welcomed if it comes from a woman or a man; how different cultures express it).

While in a scientific context in which the narrow scope of the research is very clear, reductionism, *aka* understanding emotions strictly as neurological or biological states (without inquiring about their cultural or social dimension), may be acceptable, it is undesirable in cases like that of a philosophical inquiry that aims to understand emotions as a human phenomenon. However, researching emotions *only* from a cultural or social

perspective is also undesirable because emotions have biological and neurological dimensions that cannot be ignored if the aim is to have a clearer, richer, and more complex understanding of them.

Moreover, focusing always and only on the social or cultural side of the story reinforces the idea that the world, the human (and non-human) experience, and reality in general can and should be understood through dichotomies such as nature/culture, biology/socialization, real/constructed, that so much of feminist and more generally critical and anti-oppressive theory sought to deconstruct. In other words, the study of emotions involves questioning many dichotomies such as those mentioned in Topic 2.

As mentioned, AR rejects an *a priori* clear-cut distinction between nature and culture, conceptualizing these two domains as *inter*- and *intra*-dependent (Barad, 2007). In this framework, emotions are understood as intra-actions. This definition certainly solves many problems regarding how to describe emotions, avoiding dualisms that are really limiting and restrictive for understanding the phenomenon. On the other hand, it does not say much about the specificity of emotions as such, since in AR any phenomenon can be described as an intra-action.

CR offers a complex array of conceptual tools that dissect differences and interpret emotions as emergent properties that arise from the interplay between individuals and their social contexts, but that are caused by deep (in this framework, "real") mechanisms, which may be observed or unobservable. Whether this complex ontological structure is necessary remains an open question with respect to CR's descriptions of emotions.

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required.

Data availability statement

This article does not require data. No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Reporting guidelines

I confirm that I have reviewed the relevant standards. There were no standards relevant to the research application.

AI F1000 Policy

AI "Lucrez-IA" (the University of Padova AI, based on Anthropic Claude 3.5 Sonnet) was used to check the linguistic fluency of the article. AI was also used for creating the initial structure of the abstract and plain language summary. The final version of the entire article, including the abstract and plain language summary, has been revised by me.

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Version 1

Reviewer Report 12 March 2026

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Martin E. H. Willis
University of East London, London, UK

This article is an ambitious attempt to place two meta-theories (critical realism (CR) and agential realism (AR)) in dialogue and considers some practical implications for interdisciplinary research on emotions. This novel combination of CR and AR is commendable in its aims. However, there is little discussion of the convergences and divergences of the two meta-theories and the problems these differences pose when attempting to combine them.

I believe several amendments and clarifications are required:
1. The work is mostly clear and accurate, but there are some moments where clarity is lost. For example, when introducing AR's ontology (p. 4) it is stated that "reality is constituted by phenomena, and relationships precede entities; reality is not made up of relationships or, more properly, intra-actions". Should this be "reality is made up of relationships"?
2. The ontology of both AR and CR are presented but there is no discussion of intersections and differences between the two. Nor is there any consideration of what issues need to be accounted for when attempting to think CR and AR ontologies together. How compatible are these different understandings of reality and what problems are encountered when trying to integrate them?
3. AR and CR views of causality are briefly presented but with insufficient detail, making it difficult to understand precisely how each meta-theory views causality. Furthermore, there is no discussion of the intersections and differences between the two. CR and AR offer very different accounts of causality so more needs to be done to not only account for these differences but also in providing an argument for why their combination is fruitful. Why would anybody want to integrate AR and CR? What benefits does an account of causality that combines AR and CR bring?
4. I realise this is a brief report, but I was expecting a fuller discussion of the implications of bringing together AR and CR for emotions research, yet there is little consideration of what each meta-theory offers emotions research independently let alone when they are combined. What difference do the two ontologies make to how emotions should be understood? How do the AR and CR views of causality contribute to our understanding of emotions? How might a combined AR/CR meta-theory develop these understandings further?
5. There is no clear conclusion drawn. Why should anybody want to think about CR and AR together? What difference would it make in general and to emotions research specifically?

6. There is a typo "ccording to AR" instead of "according" (bottom column 1, p. 5).

I believe if these questions and issues are addressed this article will be much stronger.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Partly

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
No

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Critical realism; emotions/feelings

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

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P. J. Wall
Technological University Dublin, Dublin, Ireland

This short report proposes a comparison between agential realism (AR) and critical realism (CR). The main aim is to explore whether the two frameworks can be brought into dialogue for interdisciplinary research, particularly in relation to the study of emotions. The paper identifies several areas of comparison (ontology, epistemology, causality, and the conceptualisation of emotions) and provides a good, solid overview of the main commitments of each position.

The central idea has been thoroughly researched, but this is a worthwhile contribution to the field. Both AR and CR attempt to move beyond the limitations of positivism and strong social

constructivism, and examining potential connections between them may be productive. The discussion also correctly highlights an important difference: AR advances a relational ontology centred on intra-actions, whereas CR proposes a stratified ontology organised around generative mechanisms operating across different domains of reality.

However, the paper remains largely descriptive and programmatic. While similarities and contrasts are outlined, it is not clear how the proposed “bridge” between the two frameworks would work in practice. The metaphysical tensions between AR’s relational ontology and CR’s layered ontology are noted but not critically examined. Despite this obvious shortcoming, I believe this report is a worthwhile addition as it provides a good starting point for those interested in this area and the philosophical nuances of CR and AR. In addition, the report raises an interesting question and provides a useful starting point for discussion. To develop the argument further, it would need to clarify the nature of the proposed integration and show more concretely how bringing AR and CR into dialogue would advance interdisciplinary research on emotions.

Despite these limitations, the report raises a worthwhile question and provides a clear starting point for further discussion. On that basis, I recommend acceptance, and I encourage the authors to continue to develop this work.

References

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Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?
Yes

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?
Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?
Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?
No source data required

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?
Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Critical Realism; global development; ai; ai for global development; sustainability; technology & ai ethics

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.