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## **Agency and Development: notes on the philosophy of science and the conduct of inquiry**

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### **Abstract**

Human agency has proven to be a contested issue in development research and practice. Although economics has been the most influential discipline, increasingly different accounts highlight distinct features of human beings and the contexts they inhabit, which lead to different implications. This article seeks to delineate the boundaries of the discussion and map out what are arguably the main alternatives within the field. Since such discussion deals with the question of what human action is, the argument is elaborated from the philosophy of science. Contra convention, the discussion uses a *philosophical* ontology, which is concerned with out connection to the world. Jackson's heuristic is adopted to generate four philosophies of science and four notions of agency, regarded as ideal typical. Neopositivism advances a rational agent, reflexivity suggests a patient, critical realism furthers an interagent, and analyticism proposes a transagent. This article invites scholars and practitioners interested in this increasingly interdisciplinary area to raise their awareness regarding the foundations on which their ideas about human agency build and note the implications they have for the production and consumption of knowledge.

**Keywords:** agency; development; philosophy of science; neopositivism; reflexivity; critical realism; analyticism

## **Introduction**

Accounting for human beings and their agency is essential for development research and practice. To different extents, the study of social phenomena –including policy– is based on causal intuitions regarding human behavior, whether as a dependent or an independent variable. A wide array of competing theories and frameworks have gained more or less currency at different moments, many coexisting at the same time. By far, the main account of human beings and human agency since the second half of the twentieth century has been that provided by rational choice theory (Nida-Rümelin 1997; Wittek et al. 2013). It has proven to be influential in both academic and practitioner circles alike. Its pervasiveness notwithstanding, in light of its shortcomings and limitations, there is a growing literature seeking to revise, reconsider, or even reject it. Hence, the discussion regarding human agency and how to account for it has become increasingly prolific but also puzzling, due to the growing number and character of contributions.

This enrichment of the debate is certainly useful as it enhances our ability to explain and understand social phenomena. From economics –by far the most influential discipline in policy-making (Thaler 2015)– to anthropology, and multiple expressions in between, the treatment of human agency has become increasingly interdisciplinary. Of late, some disciplines seem to have established a fruitful dialogue instead of talking past each other (see e.g. Kahneman 2011) although these efforts seem rather scarce. Since many of these alternatives compete with one another, it can be daunting to make sense out of an increasingly complex landscape. For researchers it can be challenging to adequately recognize the implications for the role of both subjects and themselves. For practitioners, it can be difficult to assess the scope of interventions as well as their agency in them.

To shed a modicum of light on this state of affairs, this paper proposes to delineate the boundaries of the discussion and map out what are arguably the main alternatives within it.

To do so, given that this discussion deals with fundamental questions regarding ‘what human agency is’, the point of departure is the philosophy of science. However, against the conventional approach, which establishes a primacy of ontology over the theories of knowledge and methods (Jackson 2011), a different path is advanced, namely, philosophical ontology. While the conventional approach focuses on an inventory of what exists, and therefore is best regarded as *scientific* ontology, a *philosophical* ontology is concerned with the hook-up we have to the world. (Shotter in Jackson 2011). As such, the latter is logically prior to the former and more useful for this paper’s undertaking.

This article follows a fourfold structure to make that argument. The first section, describes the philosophically ontological approach employed. Secondly, the four philosophies of sciences derived from the exercise are described. On that basis, the four notions of agency pertaining to each are elaborated on the third section. The final section concludes.

### **Philosophical ontology**

Accounting for human agency is certainly an ontological discussion, but importantly it is more usefully approached from a *philosophical* ontology rather than a *scientific* ontology. *Scientific* ontology refers to the traditional study of being or ‘what exists in the world’. That is, it alludes to an archive or inventory of objects, processes or factors that a specific research expects to exist or of which it has evidence for its existence (Jackson 2011). Instead, it is argued here, a more useful point of departure is to take one step back and start from *philosophical* ontology. This refers to the connection we have with the world or “to the conceptual and philosophical basis on which claims about the world are formulated in the first place: ontology as our ‘hook-up’ to the world, so to speak, concerned with how we as researchers are able to produce knowledge in the first place” (Shotter in Jackson 2011, 28). This point of departure seems preferable to more conventional chronological accounts of how

the concept of agency has been treated over time, because of the more evident import it has on empirical research.

In this light, this approach challenges the traditional ontology-epistemology-methodology structure. This is not only an organizing sequence but a normative suggestion, implying the primacy of ontology (questions about *being* and what exists) over epistemology (questions about *knowing* and how can we formulate/evaluate statements about the world) (Jackson 2011). It also entails the primacy of the philosophy of science over methods (the techniques used to gain knowledge about the object of study). Research strategies, therefore, become dependent on the world, meaning that “it is the nature of objects that determines their cognitive possibilities for us” (Bhaskar 1998, 25). Although reasonable at first sight, the ontology-first (*scientific* ontology) position has the fundamental problem of assuming what exists, what the world is made out of. This is problematic because, given that this is the point of departure, challenges about ontological claims are implausible, such as the epistemological question on the validity of the claim or the method-related question as to which technique to use to assess the claim (Chernoff in Jackson 2011). In this sense, scientific ontology is logically (and necessarily), subsequent to philosophical ontology since sensible claims about what exists can be made only after having established the grounds on which they are made (Bhaskar 1998).

To provide such account, this section describes de philosophically ontological approach employed. Then, the four philosophies of science derived from the exercise are described in terms of their philosophical wagers and a relevant illustration is provided for each.

### ***A heuristic and its philosophical wagers***

For this endeavor, a practical heuristic of philosophically ontological principles is required. However, the philosophy of science debate has not settled on the issue of the most important, fundamental or useful positions concerning philosophical ontologies. Instead of an all-encompassing classification, it seems more fruitful to establish categories that allow i) identifying the disagreements between different perspectives and positions in the philosophy of science; and, ii) performing adequate comparisons between them so as to elucidate the consequences of adopting either (Jackson 2011). Thus, the criterion for the heuristic is functional. A heuristic device on these bases enables the study of different approaches to agency on clear and similar criteria, which seems necessary to justify the selection of any.

Perhaps the most developed work in this regard has been elaborated by Jackson (2011), in the field of International Relations. That contribution, as he suspects, extends to social science more broadly. Thus, the present discussion relies on his argument. Jackson (2011) identifies two philosophically ontological axes: i) the relationship between the researcher and the world to be researched, or the relationship between the mind and the world; and, ii) the nature of knowable entities, or the relationship between observation and knowledge.

### ***Mind-world dualism and monism***

Each of these axes can be regarded as a continuum, at the ends of which extreme positions can be identified. In this sense, regarding the relationship between the mind and the world, at one end can be found *mind-world dualism*, and, at the other, *mind-world monism*. The former is the stance supporting that there is a world 'out there', independent of the knower, that can be known as it is. Since objectivity lies in that world, and it can be known as it is, objective knowledge is possible. The task of research is therefore to bridge the gap between the mind and the world. Philosophically, ever since the introduction of this separation by Descartes, building that bridge has been the task of epistemology (Taylor 1995). In this sense, the gap

has been bridged by the correspondence theory of truth, which postulates that only those statements (whether empirical or theoretical) that conform with some sort of accurate correspondence with the mind-independent world are true and, therefore, constitute knowledge (Swindal 2012).

Conversely, mind-world monism sees no separation between the researcher and the researched world. The knower is part of the world. Therefore, knowledge is not about elaborating accurate descriptions of an already-existing world. From this perspective, it is simply nonsensical to talk about ‘the world’ as separated from the activities of making sense of it. Hence, since there is no gap to bridge in the generation of knowledge, one early implication of a mind-world monist position is the riddance of modern philosophy’s epistemology (Taylor 1995), a consequential insight that is virtually obscured if the traditional ontology-epistemology-methodology structure is taken for granted.

### ***Phenomenalism and transfactualism***

The relationship between knowledge and observation offers two positions as well, namely, *phenomenalism* and *transfactualism*. Phenomenalism describes the stance that knowledge claims are purely related to human experience. That is, all that can be known is that which can be perceived by the senses of the observer. There is nothing that can be known outside of human sensory perception, because outside of it, nothing exists. This position ought not to be confused with empiricism, which posits that only the ‘naked’ senses (solely sensual perception) matter. Instead, phenomenism adopts an enlarged notion of experience to include ‘mediated observation’ as well, i.e. the use of different types of artifacts to enhance sensory perception.

At the other end of the spectrum is transfactualism, which holds that knowledge can go beyond experienced facts (hence its denomination) to grasp aspects that exceed them. The

latter may entail the processes and factors that generate those facts (Wight 2006) and that are not perceived by the human senses. That is, according to this position, sense experience does not exhaust the possibilities of knowledge. There is more to be known than that which is apprehended by the senses. In other words, this position entails the possibility of transcending experience and thereby of knowing in-principle unobservable things (Bhaskar 1975).

The conjunction of these commitments provides four philosophies of science or approaches to inquiry (see Figure 1). At the conjunction of mind-world dualism and phenomenism the most widespread approach can be found, namely *neopositivism*. The framework that combines mind-world dualism with transfactualism is *critical realism*. *Analyticism* is at the crossroads of mind-world monism and phenomenism. Finally, mind-world monism and transfactualism underpin *reflexivity*. This heuristic is ideal-typical in the Weberian sense and, therefore, it does not depict a reality, but rather exposes relevant commitments that are elusive, implicit or unclear in actuality, in a simplified manner.

[Insert Figure 1.]

In employing this approach, three caveats are relevant: one about considering this a typology, one about the consequences of the philosophy of science on empirical research, and one about the concept of methodology. Thus, the argument subscribes to Humphrey's (2013) pertinent caution. Firstly, this argument regards Jackson's contribution as a heuristic rather than a typology. Because some philosophical issues are left out in his approach (as mentioned above, the author admits that it is not exhaustive), it is considered a *clarificatory* tool rather than a classificatory one.

Secondly, in stressing the implications that philosophical ontologies have for empirical research, Jackson's approach "[...] tends to run together the philosophical



assumptions which determine what form knowledge claims must take and the explanatory strategies used to generate those claims” (Humphreys 2013, 292). So philosophical assumptions dictate explanatory practices. However, from a methodological stand, nothing precludes sharing different strategies among different frameworks, “at least when employed heuristically” (Humphreys 2013, 298). Even though different explanatory practices (and the methods that they encompass) may be favored by certain philosophies of science, this only suggests convention. Distinct philosophies of science are not differentiated by explanatory strategies, what differentiates them are the ends that they pursue.

Thirdly, Jackson regards the four resulting philosophies of science as methodologies. However, whereas his claim rests on his deterministic proposal, this paper understands methodology rather as complexes of philosophical assumptions, practices and methods, related to one another by logic as well as convention. As a result, philosophy does not determine which research strategies (and methods) are adequate but the ends themselves to which they are employed (Humphreys 2013).

#### **Four philosophies of science: positivism, reflexivity, critical realism, and analyticism**

In this section each philosophy of science is presented, necessarily in a summarized manner. This discussion provides their most relevant differentiating characteristics suggesting some basic intuitions regarding the implications these philosophies of science have for the study of agency. To approach that overview, in addition to the conceptual elaboration, in each case an illustration from the relevant literature is introduced to exemplify how these philosophies of science relate to research traditions.

##### ***Neopositivism***

Combining mind-world dualism and phenomenism produces neopositivism. This position could be considered the heir of modern philosophy. It inherits the Cartesian separation of mind and matter as two distinct substances. Knowledge, or “conclusively justified true belief” (Quinton 2010, 3), is the outcome of the quest for absolute certainty from the mind about the world. According to this position, objective knowledge is possible. Therefore, for neopositivism, mind-world dualism functions as an argument (Jackson 2011). Consequently, only those claims that mirror or reflect that objective, law-governed world, are considered ‘truth’ or ‘knowledge’ proper. This can be attested in the claim that scientific propositions have to take the form of ‘general’ or ‘covering laws’ (Gorsky 2013, Caldwell 1994), mostly prevalent during the twentieth century. In this sense, the relationship between the social and natural sciences is evident. Emulating the latter, the aim of the former is to ‘uncover’ universal and unchanging laws at best, and regularities at worst, that allow prediction and control of phenomena. That is, they are concerned with the study of causality.

Phenomenalism, in turn, implies that the researcher can generate knowledge only from observable or experienced phenomena. In this sense, the influence of Hume becomes apparent. According to this tradition, there is nothing outside the observable, since experience establishes the scope, limits and justification of knowledge (Rosenberg 1993). Importantly, experience encompasses sensory perception but also introspective awareness of our mind sets (Dicker 1998). The focus is, therefore, on observation, measurement, and exact calculation. Therefore, the task for this approach is lifting the veil of our own perceptions to, following the footsteps of the natural sciences, uncover the empirical causal regularities in the world. As such, this perspective focuses on explaining (*erklären*) social phenomena, favoring the study of causality as well as covariation, and the research strategies that make it possible.

This philosophy of science has proven to be so influential so as to be considered the orthodoxy in social science (Gorsky 2013). This is particularly so in some branches of

economics. As Caldwell (1994, 4) states “[f]ew economists keep up with developments in the philosophy of science, and as such it is understandable that many may still labor under the illusion that economics is, or can be, a positivist discipline”. In practice, as Smith (1996, 16) states, it can be said that positivism has dominated research through at least four propositions:

1) belief in the unity of science; 2) commitment to a strict fact/value separation; 3) belief in the existence of regularities in the social as well as the natural world that licenses deductive-nomological and inductive- statistical forms of covering law explanation; and 4) empirical validation, falsification, being viewed as proper inquiry.

Perhaps the best illustration of this position is Milton Friedman’s (1953) *The Methodology of Positive Economics*. In his seminal work, Friedman starts by stating that the aim of a positivist science is objectivity, in the following terms “[p]ositive economics is in principle independent of any particular ethical position or normative judgements” (Friedman 1953, 4). Moreover, he directly establishes the tradition discussed above when addressing the elements of theory and the goals of science, and it is pertinent to quote him in full:

The ultimate goal of a positive science is the development of a "theory" or "hypothesis" that yields valid and meaningful (i.e., not truistic) predictions about phenomena not yet observed. Such a theory is, in general, a complex intermixture of two elements. In part, it is a "language" designed to promote "systematic and organized methods of reasoning." In part, it is a body of substantive hypotheses designed to abstract essential features of complex reality. [...] Viewed as a language, theory has no substantive content; it is a set of tautologies. Its function is to serve as a filing system for organizing empirical material and facilitating our understanding of

it; and the criteria by which it is to be judged are those appropriate to a filing system.

(Friedman 1953, 7)

Further, he then elaborates:

Viewed as a body of substantive hypotheses, theory is to be judged by its predictive power for the class of phenomena which it is intended to "explain." Only factual evidence can show whether it is "right" or "wrong" or, better, tentatively "accepted" as valid or "rejected." As I shall argue at greater length below, the only relevant test of the validity of a hypothesis is comparison of its predictions with experience. The hypothesis is rejected if its predictions are contradicted ("frequently" or more often than predictions from an alternative hypothesis); it is accepted if its predictions are not contradicted; great confidence is attached to it if it has survived many opportunities for contradiction. Factual evidence can never "prove" a hypothesis; it can only fail to disprove it, which is what we generally mean when we say, somewhat inexactly, that the hypothesis has been "confirmed" by experience (Friedman 1953, 8-9).

The focus on explaining, predicting and generalizing has pervaded practice as well. From research centers to international organizations to development agencies, the confidence on insights so gained is virtually exclusive. The interest in replicating results and following best practices shows to the expectation of attaining future outcomes similar to those observed in past experiences.

### ***Reflexivity***

At the antipodes of neopositivism, at the conjunction of mind-world monism and transfactualism, there is reflexivity. Mind-world monism posits that the mind is interwoven with the world in a constitutive manner, that the knower is part of the known or, in other words, that the researcher is constitutive of the world. Therefore, the activities carried out to research the latter are themselves the world, as they are producing it. Contra dualists, for monists, the 'world' does not refer to a stockpile of things but to an array of facts. The objects with which scientific inquiry is concerned are not meaningless entities susceptible to our senses, but are always and already intertwined with intentional (our interests) and conceptual (our theories and creativity) content. As such, the "'world' is in important ways a *component of practical experience*, which does away with any effort to conform mental representations to a mind-independent world (Jackson 2011, 114, emphasis in the original).

The second wager, transfactualism, must be understood in light of monism. It states that in-principle unobservables or undetectables can be known. Since it is nonsensical to speak of an external mind-independent world as the ultimate object of knowledge, and since knowledge stems from practical activity, then the only things susceptible to transfactual knowledge are those practical activities themselves. Knowledge produced in this manner takes the form of some self-awareness of the researcher, i.e. at least: her research practices, and the wider social and organizational context in which the research activity itself is embedded.

For reflexivity, knowledge is inseparable from the social standing and the organizational practices of the research but, at the same time, it is irreducible to them. Knowledge claims are always 'laden' in the sense that they are always grounded on the social position of the researcher. The latter, in turn, answers to several sets of logics of social distinction (e.g. ethnicity, social status, gender), of which the research must be self-conscious

because knowledge either strengthens or questions these distinctions<sup>1</sup>; that is, it either challenges power-relationships or supports them. “Knowledge in every society is produced to be used for a purpose. And those who produce and acquire knowledge exercise a form of power” (Chernoff 2007, 159). Thus, knowledge about social arrangements does not begin with the world, but with the self. This challenges expectations of objectivity and the fact/value dichotomy. For reflectivists systematically analyzing their role as knowledge-generators and locating their work relative to their broader social context will produce valid knowledge about i) things experienced and ii) the structures and social context that produce those experiences. That being so, this perspective focuses on understanding (*verstehen*) social phenomena, leaning towards hermeneutics as well as interpretation, and research strategies that favors them.

If (neo)positivism is the dominant orthodoxy, then reflexivity is the dominant heterodoxy (Gorsky 2013). This position, encompassing postmodernism<sup>2</sup> and poststructuralism<sup>3</sup>, conventionally implies a rejection of the unity of science arguing that the natural and the social world are radically different. While the natural world could be regarded as law-governed (focus on explaining causality), the social world is ruled by meaning (focus on interpretation) (Gorsky 2013). Since individuals inevitably act in and make sense of the world from a prejudiced position, the latter is of interest and language is the vehicle that allows its analysis. What is more, language allows people to communicate phenomena external to them, but it does not do so neutrally, it is a social act that contributes to the constitution of the world. “[T]o learn a language is to learn a set of rules, which brings the

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, frameworks within this umbrella often “share the “critical theory” idea that theories of the social world are not merely neutral descriptions of the way social actors (individuals, organizations, corporations, banks, states, etc.) behave but are also “critical” in the sense that they understand one of the functions of social theory to be a thorough critique of the societies in which the theory are produced” (Chernoff 2007, 131).

<sup>2</sup> “Postmodernism [...] can be understood as a refusal to accept the notions of “objective knowledge” and “universal truth” and as an attempt to challenge the optimistic belief that there are, even in principle, solutions to all our problems” (Chernoff 2007: 154).

<sup>3</sup> “Poststructuralism is a [...] family of theories that are radically opposed to rationalism, naturalism, and the scientific approach to the social sciences” (Chernoff 2007: 153).

learner into a specific view of the world, namely, the world created by those rules. This is because using the words and sentences of the language have effects in the real world; use of the language allows a person to do things” (Chernoff 2007, 157). Therefore, the aims of research and the methods used ought to be different from those used in the natural sciences.

For post-structuralists, language is a social activity that creates one’s understanding of reality and, by so doing, it shapes it. Therefore, language is intrinsically political, and to highlight this character, it is referred to as *discourse*. Stronger versions within this umbrella push the argument further and posit that both the social and natural sciences are governed by ‘discourses’ and ‘powers’ (Peet and Hartwick 2009). Everyone is so deeply entangled in their own ‘stories’ and ‘language games’, and since there is no mind-independent world, there is no neutral, objective or real position from which to judge them. As such, they subscribe to epistemic relativism (Gorsky 2013).

Arguably the main example is found in Arturo Escobar’s (1985, 1995, 1999) work. He challenges the notion of development asserting that “the development discourse [...] has created an extremely efficient apparatus for producing knowledge about, and the exercise of power over, the Third World” (Escobar 1995, 9). Therefore, he highlights the power exerted by discourse over reality and how the former shapes the latter. This power is not neutral but answers to the interests of those imposing the discourse. An illustration is the North’s self-entitlement to distinguish between developed and underdeveloped peoples, and placing itself as the former. This changed how each side perceived the other and, more importantly, themselves<sup>4</sup>. The discourse regarding development legitimized only certain forms of knowledge and subjectivity, i.e. those that perpetuate the system of power and serve the interest of the powerful (Rahmena 1997). That being so, the development project entailed

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<sup>4</sup> “On that day, two billion people became underdeveloped [...] from that time on, they ceased being what they were, in all their diversity, and were transmogrified into an inverted mirror of other’s reality: a mirror that belittles them and sends them to the end of the queue, a mirror that defines their identity, which is really that of a heterogeneous and diverse majority, simply in the terms of a homogenizing and narrow minority” (Esteve 1995, 7).

exclusion, and the post-structural critique sought to scrutinize “particularly the exclusion of the knowledges, voices and concerns of those whom, paradoxically, development was supposed to serve: the poor of Asia, Africa and Latin America” (Escobar 2007, 20). So dominant was this system that even criticisms of it had to be manifested within the boundaries of its discourse.

As a result, the post-development project advances alternatives to development, instead of alternatives of development. Far from mainstream discourses, the reliance on expert knowledge and the intervention of international aid agencies, these are located in vernacular cultures, at the local level, in grassroots movements, rural communities and even the informal sector (Rist 1997; Ziai 2007). Accordingly, the emphasis is plurality, the generation and acceptance of various equally legitimate coexisting discourses and representations that answer to the specificities of contexts, peoples and languages.

### ***Critical Realism***

The conjunction of mind-world dualism and transfactualism establishes the assumptions on which critical realism erects. As with neopositivism, it also departs from the commitment that there is a mind-independent world out there. In this case, the separation between the mind and the world establishes a priority of the world. This is an example of the ontology-first approach, in which ontology is scientific and epistemology is subordinated to it. This focus is best illustrated by what critical realists refer to as the ‘epistemic fallacy’<sup>5</sup> (Bhaskar 1975; Wight 2006). In practice, the implication is that because what things are made of (ontology) comes first, then epistemology is concerned with securing correspondence between knowledge and the world. Thus, this presumption leads to the position that knowledge about

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<sup>5</sup> The epistemic fallacy refers to the error critical realists find in providing epistemological answers to scientific ontological questions, (or putting epistemology first), which in their view leads to the untenable position that all that is known is all there is (see Collier 1994).



the world consists on grasping it as it truly is and ensuring that statements about it correspond to its deepest essence.

This wager is related to the next, transfactualism, since to approach that essence, for critical realists, it is necessary to go beyond experience. This move enables critical realism to explore the causal properties generating those experiences. That means going deeper than systematic relationships and covariance causality to discuss causal power and, thereby, establish more secure knowledge about the world. From this perspective, facts are important but exclusive focus on them, as in positivism, is akin to content with appearances (Bhaskar 2009). The more relevant task is to transcend them. Facts are regarded as phenomena of processes ensuing behind them, which is where the locus of attention ought to be. Indeed, although the concept of a fact reflects the spontaneous consciousness of the knower (in science), it must be transcended in their reflective consciousness. Therefore, “[c]ritical realists are free to go beyond the facts, to the transfactual processes behind them” (Price and Martin 2018, 90). On that account, this perspective allows for the combination of measurement and meaning to account for social phenomena, and the strategies that can enable such design.

Unsurprisingly, this philosophy of science is best represented by the tradition with the same label and led by the work of Roy Bhaskar (e.g. 1975; 1998). Critical realism sees the mind-independent world (whether natural or social) as made of strata that are ontologically distinct. This is a stratified world in which each stratum has powers and properties of its own. Moreover, these layers are not readily determined but constantly changing. The interactions of certain entities and properties at one level can generate ‘emergent’ others at different levels. Thus, social structures are perennially changing and emerging.

The heuristic used to grasp this is represented by three ‘ontological domains’: the real, the actual and the empirical (Bhaskar 1975; Bhaskar and Lawson 1998). The domain of the

real consists of all the mechanisms in the world, all the entities and agents, all the powers and properties. The actual consists of those mechanisms that have been activated, whether or not they have been observed. The empirical consists of all the mechanisms that have been activated and observed. All three domains, and their composing elements, exist. The (main) task of science is, therefore, to approximate the real accounting for those mechanisms and their inner workings. This approach has some advantages as Price and Martin (2018, 90) state: “A welcome consequence of this layered ontology is that critical realist writing lacks angst about the reality of transcendental, transfactual things”. To be sure, some are more readily approachable to inquiry. As Archer (2003, 21) recognizes: “[...] only the actual rather than the real is accessible to direct human perception from the human perspective”.

Critical realism, thus, seems to subscribe to certain principles, at least, a commitment to ontology, the use of retrodution, and a commitment to reflexivity. The commitment to ontology entails the assumption of the existence of ‘something’ with existentially intransitive reality (Bhaskar, Danemark and Price 2017). This means that explanatory models that account for the empirical level are not mere social (mind) constructs but refer to real mechanisms underlying the empirical and actual layers of reality (Price and Martin 2018). Retrodution refers to critical realism’s approach to causality and has been conceived as “a distinctive form of inference [...] which posits that events are explained through identifying and hypothesizing causal powers and mechanisms that can produce them” (Hu 2018, 118–139). Reflexivity, in turn, denotes the possibility of both identifying inconsistencies between theory and practice and generating solutions (Price and Martin 2018).

### ***Analyticism***

The combination of mind-world monism and phenomenalism produces analyticism. Monism, as discussed in the case of reflexivity, establishes a continuum of sorts between the world and

knowledge production activities (i.e. the mind). That 'world' is a reservoir of facts. We do not have immediate or unmediated access to objects of scientific interest, rather they are always and inevitably mixed with content (conceptual or intentional), because we necessarily approach them from a vantage point. This resonates with the Kantian position stating that we cannot know things as they are (*'das ding an sich'*). Instead, the knower is part of the thing and the thing becomes a part of the knower. The knower is a part of the thing because they make sense of the thing and the thing is whatever sense is made of it by its observer. In other words, there is no known without the knower. The thing is a part of the knower because things leave a print in the mind of the observer and therefore they change them, i.e. there is a different knower before and after the thing.

Phenomenalism, in turn, posits that knowledge claims are limited to what can be experienced, either directly or indirectly. At the same time, this does not mean that analyticists cannot use propositions about in-principle undetectables such as powers and properties. Indeed, they can, as long as they are used *instrumentally* to explain observed phenomena, i.e. as long as they are used to explain manifest action and without any ontological commitments about their reality (Jackson 2011). In consequence, this perspective also permits the combination of measurement and meaning to account for social phenomena, and the strategies that can enable such design.

Classical philosophical pragmatism is a theory of meaning and a theory of knowledge (Quinton 2010), an account of 'how we think' (Menand 1997) and act (Garcés 2020a) that illustrates analyticism. At its most basic level, it departs from 'acting', not from 'things' (the world) or from 'reason' (mind) (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009). Pragmatism moves beyond the view of inquiry as a mind passively receiving knowledge from a world that is unveiled to it, as if truth corresponds to reality, which Dewey called the 'spectator theory of knowledge' (Bacon, 2012). Instead, it sees the generation of knowledge as accounting for change, not for

absolutes (Tallise and Aikin 2011). As a philosophy of process, it assumes continuity in nature. In particular, regarding organisms, it encompasses all kinds of behavior, “from primitive reflexes, to habits, to reflective intelligence” (Baldwin 1988, 39).

What is more, from this consequentialist perspective, knowledge production is relevant “[p]rimarily, persistingly and essentially for the sake of action” (Quinton 2010, 3). Therefore, it regards inquiry as the process by which humans engage with their environment so as to solve an obstacle until they are able to further human action again. This relationship with the environment is regarded as a unity. Humans and context (whether social or environmental) are inseparable. In their engagement with the world humans may encounter situations that hinder action, i.e. indeterminate situations. To further action, humans test different hypotheses, making those situations determinate. In that effort, humans construct the world from their vantage points and once action is furthered, they are transformed as they have knowledge and capabilities they lacked before. Nevertheless, that knowledge is not considered as ‘truth’, in the absolute immutable sense, because in no way is it assumed to capture a mind-independent objective world, but instead is regarded as for-the-time-being reliable knowledge. As such, it is referred to as warranted assertibility (Quinton 2010). Against absolutes, these inferences can be questioned and challenged at any time, as long as there is good reason for doing so, such as when action is hindered anew (Cochran 2002). This is why “Dewey’s pragmatism cannot be assimilated to either traditional realism or idealism” (Hildebrand 2003, 75). As a consequence, pragmatism rejects the fact/value dichotomy<sup>6</sup>.

Finally, for pragmatism recognizes that an organism’s environment is constituted by objects more on this below). These are everything and anything of which the individual is aware (Blumer 2004). They can real or fictional, material or immaterial, detectable or

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<sup>6</sup> “These pragmatist philosophers did not refer only to the kind of normative judgments that we call “moral” or “ethical”; judgments of “coherence”, “simplicity”, “plausibility”, “reasonableness”, and of what Dirac famously called the beauty of a hypothesis, are all normative judgments in Charles Peirce’s sense, judgments of «what ought to be» in the case of reasoning” (Putnam 2002: 31).

undetectable. Simply put, if a person notices it, it is an object to them. Importantly, although pragmatism admits them, it makes no ontological commitment to their existence.

### **Four accounts of agency: agents, patients, interagents, and transagents**

Each of the aforementioned philosophies of science entails an ideal-typical notion of human agency (see Figure 2). This section is dedicated to flesh them out and suggest some implications for development research and practice.

[Insert Figure 2.]

#### *The positivist agent:*

Concerning agency, neopositivism proposes a rather straightforward notion, an anthropocentric one, in the literal sense. As such, it is often referred to as individualism. Reality is given to humans in consciousness, the latter mirrors the former. Moreover, not only does humanity stand outside the world, but also outside history, since relationships with other human beings do not affect the self. As such, modernity's self "[...] is not contingently made but is universally given" (Archer 2003, 23). Additionally, as children of modernity, human beings are characterized by one property, which was treated as given, namely, rationality, regarded as the source of humanity's emancipation. Human beings, based on their rationality, enjoy ample freedom and control over themselves and their environment to pursue and attain their goals. Therefore, neopositivists favor studying the agent based on theories such as 'rational choice theory' (RCT) and 'revealed preference theory' (RPT). According to RCT, "All human behavior can be viewed as involving participants who (1) maximize their utility, (2) form a stable set of preferences and (3) accumulate an optimal amount of information and

other inputs in a variety of markets” (Becker 1976, 14). Apropos of RPT, the main assumption is that choice reflects the preference of individuals that maximize their utility and, consequently, provides all the relevant information about the subject. Importantly, choice is also the only observable part of human conduct and, therefore, considered objective.

Furthermore, since the self is given, this property is considered as immutable and universal. Therefore, there is little in the context, social structures or the physical environment can affect it. Nothing in the world contributes to make humans who they are. The individual is a “self-interested, calculative, atomistic chooser” (Garcés 2020b, 8). This is the known imagery of the rational man or *homo economicus*<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, human beings are essentially the same, logocentric beings whose self has been rid of all that is contingent, and as such they can be treated as homogenous regardless geography, history and society (Archer 2003).

From this perspective, the individual is metaphysically prior to society. Individuals constitute societies, the latter being epiphenomena of the former. That is, this position subscribes to methodological individualism, encompassing ontological and explanatory individualism (Robeyns 2008). While the former posits that all that exist are individuals and their properties and, thus, society is nothing but the aggregation of them, the latter builds on this and argues that society can be explained in terms of individuals and their properties (Bhargava 1998).

#### *The reflectivist patient:*

When it comes to agency, reflexivity builds on post-modernism which, as social constructionist, takes a diametrical position from that of neopositivism and rationality. It stresses that rationality is a human creation, not a given, that answers to the particular

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<sup>7</sup> Certainly, recent very influential research has questioned some of these assumptions, mainly in the field of behavioral economics (see e.g. Camerer et al 2003; Thaler and Sunstein 2009; Kahneman 2011). Nonetheless, the challenge has not reached neither the methodological level nor the philosophy of science.

(geographical, historical, social) circumstances of its creators<sup>8</sup>. Thus, it rejects it as the source of emancipation and instead regards it as a form of social control. Human activity is inevitably circumscribed to a context: a place, a time and a community (Chernoff 2007). This, certainly, includes the language. There is a relationship, it is argued, between power, truth and knowledge, where reason and science command and exert dominance over virtually every aspect of life, saturating all of experience (Peet and Hartwick 2009).

People's preferences and identities are not fixed and constant. They depend on practices, which depend on the context. "Identities and interests are developed by what we do. Our "doing" creates our sense of identity [...] Identities are affected by what the agent "does." But the constitutive nature of that action—what it is—also depends on the social structure" (Chernoff 2007, 144). Social structures, in turn, are not collections of material things, not even the aggregate of individuals, but complexes composed of sets of relationships. The dynamics between agents and structures is of cogeneration. Consequently, people are deeply embedded in their social structures or contexts, constituting them and being constituted by them<sup>9</sup>.

Because communicating via language shapes society and reality, for post-structuralists, societies are "structured largely by their *dominant discourses*, which produce stories or *narratives* about what is and what is not desirable, legitimate, and acceptable" (Chernoff 2007, 156). Post-structuralists, therefore, frequently seek to expose the subjugated sides of the human being that have been sacrificed by privileging rationality. In that project, the unified rational individual is replaced by a "socially and linguistically decentered and fragmented subject with multiple identities" (Peet and Hartwick 2009, 201).

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<sup>8</sup> As Derrida (1971: 213) put it "The white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own logos, that is, the mythos of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason".

<sup>9</sup> "Which came first—the individual or the social structure? Most critics of rationalism have answered that agents and structures each have a part in making the other what it is. They are, as we have seen, "mutually constituted" or "cogenerated"" (Chernoff 2007, 147).

Consequently, meanings take center stage. Meanings create human beings, not the other way around. Linguistic systems determine the person, what they perceive (it makes the world intelligible), what they can be (it furnishes a role), what they ought to do (it establishes normativity), for there is “nothing in the mind that was not first in the conversation” (Harré 1983, 116). Since human beings are created by meanings, they are whatever the society in which they are embedded dictates them to be and so is their agency. Thus, they can be regarded as *patients*. The sense of individuality and of self is related to the command of the linguistic first person (the ‘I’) (Archer 2003).

At the extreme, this position is exemplified by methodological holism, of the stance that the agent is wholly explained by groups, collectives, and states (Zahle 2003), conceived as more than the mere individual within them but the complex of relationships composing them. The latter and its parts are the ultimate constituent of social reality, and therefore individuals can be accounted for such terms<sup>10</sup>.

*The critical realist interagent:*

Regarding critical realist agency, the most elaborated account is arguably that provided by Archer (2003, 1982). She argues that agency and society are independent strata with powers of their own, which can neither be reduced to the other nor “[...] should be regarded as inseparable and mutually constitutive” (Archer 2003, 7). These strata and powers can be observed or not but exist and, accordingly, can be known and acted upon. From this viewpoint, the sense of self is prior to our sociality. Self-consciousness, a continuous sense of self is derived from embodied practices in the world, which includes but goes above and beyond society<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> To be sure, being an ideal type, certain developments in the relevant literature have been omitted, like the incorporation of the subject or some kind of agency (see e.g. Archer 2003).

<sup>11</sup> “One of the most important properties that we have, the power to know ourselves to be the same being over time, depends upon practice in the environment rather than conversation in society. Instead, the sequence which



Her argument is based on the ‘primacy of practice’ in the constitution of self-conscious human beings and for personal identity. As such, there is the explicit recognition of the existence of a human being *per se* and a relationship with their surroundings<sup>12</sup>. The primacy of practice entails that what is at the core of human beings is ‘doing’. This is shown in the evolutionary/developmental movement from embodied knowledge to practical knowledge to discursive knowledge, generated over time as what dominates human experience itself moves from the natural order (nature) to the practical order (material culture) and to the social order (propositional culture), respectively (Archer 2003). This argument, particularly the first and second moments, show that the sense of selfhood exists prior to language, against post-structuralist positions. Similarly, by positing that human beings, throughout those movements, are accompanied and influenced by a historically developed social context (and a world), which establishes possibilities as well as limits to them, it rejects the individualist notion of agency. By considering ‘practice as pivotal’ Archer (2003) suggests that it is only through practice that many human powers and properties such as self-consciousness, knowledge of the world and reflexivity, which exist only *in potentia*, are realized.

To account for the dynamics between agency and society, Archer (1995) advances the morphogenetic approach. It seeks to establish the conditions under which *morphogenesis* and *morphostasis* take place. While the former refers to the processes changing or furthering a complex system’s given structure or state, the latter denotes the processes maintaining the

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leads to the emergence of our selfhood derives from how our species-being interacts with the way the world is, which is independent of how we take it to be, or the constructions we put upon it. Each one of us has to discover, through embodied practice, the distinctions between self and otherness, then between subject and object, before finally arriving at the distinction between the self and other people. Only when these distinctions have been learned through embodied practice can they then be expressed in language” (Archer 2003, 8).

<sup>12</sup> This relationship is expressed as follows, in her argument against post-structuralism “[...] the relationship between human beings and the world never can be severed. The way we are organically constituted, and the way in which the world is, together with the fact that we have to interact with the world in order to survive, let alone to flourish, means that an important part of being human is proofed against language” (Archer 2003, 3). Despite the wording, as it is argued in this paper, this should not be confused with any adherence to mind-world monism.

state of those systems, at various levels (Archer 1995; 1982). Social morphogenesis, thus, describes a close and dynamic relationship between agency and society, where society exists before the action that may change it or reproduce it, and where the changed or reproduced society exists after that action. Further, Archer (1995, 156) conceives of this as a morphogenetic cycle, with two fundamental principles: (1) that “structure necessarily predates the action leading to its reproduction or transformation and (2) that structural elaboration necessarily postdates those actions that have transformed it or give rise to it” (Archer 1995, 156). In other words, *interaction* takes place among actors and it produces structures, which condition future interactions among actors and their possibility to generate change (structural elaboration).

These structures are in-principle observables but assumed to exist nonetheless and, therefore, are considered both knowable and modifiable. Thus, to exert change in structures agents resort to their power of reflexivity and, to a certain extent, their ability to reshape structures is dependent on their collective agency. Their corporate agency becomes key in inducing social change. Over time these processes overlap and the structure-interaction-structural elaboration sequence is endless.

*The pragmatist transagent:*

Analyticist agency has proven most elusive. Despite its rich contribution, pragmatism has not elaborated a notion of agency and the self (Wiley 2008). To recall, the relationship between organisms (humans) and their environment (context) is considered action. Moreover, because continuity is assumed in nature, no clear distinction can be made between them. In their contribution Dewey and Bentley (1949) emphasized the concept of ‘transaction’. They dismissed the prevailing notions of self-action and inter-action, which entailed, respectively, that things acted by their own powers, and that one thing is balanced against another thing as

in causal relations. In both notions the focus is on the units that compose them. Transaction, in turn, entails “[...] that systems deal with aspects and phases of action without any attribution to elements or entities supposedly detachable from the system that includes them” (Smith 2004, 137). Therefore, the organism-environment *transaction* constitutes one indivisible unit. Dewey (1930, 1958) favored the terms organism and environment so as not to suggest any metaphysical primacy of either over the other. Organisms, as part of their environment, constantly change it with their practices, and the environment is constantly changing them in turn. Therefore, they are mutually constitutive of each other<sup>13</sup>.

The notions of *doubt*, *belief* and *habit* and *inquiry* become relevant when discussing human (trans)action. Doubt is a state of uneasiness and dissatisfaction generated by a situation in which there is uncertainty about how to proceed, how to act. Belief is the state of calm and satisfaction that dissolves doubt as it is one on which action can be confidently furthered. Habit is made of acts and indicates an aggregation of acts structuring experience. In this sense, contrary to common wisdom, a habit does not denote repeated acts, but refers to “an acquired predisposition to *ways* or modes of response (Dewey in Hildebrand 2008, 25, emphasis in the original). That is, habits are tendencies or dispositions and as such are subject to change.

Both doubt and belief promote action but in different ways. Whereas belief guides desires and action according to likely expectations, doubt prompts action to overcome doubt itself, this is *inquiry* (Peirce in Menand 1997). Consequently, the attainment of belief, and ultimately habits of action, is the sole function of inquiry or thought (Peirce in Menand

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<sup>13</sup> “Experience is primarily a process of undergoing: a process of standing something; of suffering and passion, of affection in the literal sense of these words. The organism has to endure, to undergo the consequences of its own actions. [...] Undergoing, however, is never mere passivity. The most patient patient is more than receptor. He is also an agent—a reactor, one trying experiments, one concerned with undergoing in a way which may influence what is still to happen. Sheer endurance, side-stepping evasions, are, after all, ways of treating the environment with a view to what such treatment will accomplish. Even if we shut ourselves up in the most clam-like fashion, we are doing something; our passivity is an acute attitude, not an extinction of response. Just as there is no assertive action, no aggressive attack upon things as they are, which is all action, so there is no undergoing which is not on our part also a going on and a going through” (Dewey 1917, 10-11)

1997). Of particular importance here is the primacy of habits above choice. Habits are regarded as “a predisposition formed by a number of specific acts is an immensely more intimate and fundamental part of ourselves than are vague, general, conscious choices” (Dewey 1930, 25). Therefore, for Dewey (1930, 125) “[m]an is a creature of habit, not of reason nor yet of instinct”.

Accordingly, humans have agency and act purposefully, although their action can be more or less reflective (Joas 1996). Immerse in the constant of change, they seek to influence the shape that change may take. The world, thus, is interpreted in terms of the consequences of their actions. The pragmatic maxim conveys this message emphatically: “Consider what effects that might conceivably have practical bearings you conceive the object of your conception to have. Then your conception of those effects is the **WHOLE** of your conception of the object” (Peirce 1905, 171, emphasis in the original). Humans, thus, have the capacity to anticipate future consequences from present (or past) events. This is inference or intelligence (Dewey 1910) and intelligent action is acting according to ideas and values that fit coherently within the wider system of proven ideas and values, i.e. beliefs.

As transagents, humans act towards what they notice, what exists for them. As mentioned above, these are referred to as objects and can be anything and everything of which an individual is aware. Thus, an individual’s world or environment consists of the objects of which they are aware. Moreover, objects are socially generated and their meaning is constructed in terms of action. Infants acquire the objects that constitute their world by learning from people and how they act towards objects and this becomes habits, which are “the mainspring of human action, and [...] are formed for the most part under the influence of the customs of a group.” (Dewey 1946, 159). Consequently, “human beings are intelligent, reflective, diversely motivated organisms of habit that can be studied in terms of their objects; that is, they are transagents” (Garces 2020a, 17)

## **Concluding remarks**

Humans beings and their agency are a contested issue in development research and practice. Although economics has been, by far, the most influential discipline, there is an increasing literature discussing human agency from different perspectives and disciplines. To shed a modicum of light on this at times opaque issue, this project has proposed a philosophical argument. Because at its heart lies the issue of what is human agency, an ontological discussion has been presented. Against convention, it does not follow the ontology-epistemology-methodology order, which suggests the primacy of ontology, understood as an inventory of things. Thus, it is best regarded as scientific ontology. Instead, this project has advanced a *philosophical* ontology, concerned with our hook-up to the world. As such, the latter is logically prior to the former, and a more pertinent point of departure.

Following Jackson's (2011) heuristic, four philosophies of science and their respective views of human agency, regarded as ideal typical, are derived from combining the axes related to the relationship between the mind and the world, and the relationship between knower and the known, which are continua with extremes. Each has important implications for research and practice.

At the conjunction of mind-world dualism and phenomenalism lies the dominant approach: neopositivism and its rational agent. This is the known *homo economicus*, characterized as a self-interested, calculative, atomistic chooser. The focus here is mainly in explaining human conduct. Researchers working within this position seek objectivity, generalization, and external validity, and therefore must ensure that their biases do not influence their findings and to employ the methods that enable this. Practitioners deciding on the bases of the latter should critically assess the assumptions made and, thusly, their actual scope and limitations.

At the antipodes, mind-world monism and transfactualism, with a growing literature objecting to this orthodoxy, is the main heterodoxy: reflexivity and its patient. Humans are so described because their agency is dictated by language. Thus, the interest is in understanding human behavior. Researchers within this paradigm focus on (inter)subjectivities, the construction of meaning as well as internal validity, and acknowledge their own role throughout the conduct of inquiry as well as that of their findings on the broader research and social landscape. Practitioners basing decisions on these insights ought to be aware of the intentions undergirding them as well as the context in which they are produced to adequately consider their applicability elsewhere.

Against this backdrop, recognizing the limitations in both and the pertinence of explanation and understanding, there have been more recent developments. One, which has received increasing attention is critical realism and its interagent. This designation conveys the idea of cycle in the exchange between structure and agent, which suggests an interaction in which each unit takes turns in acting and reacting, in the change or maintenance of the underlying mechanisms and layers of reality. Researchers working in this tradition look for causal explanations for social phenomena beyond sensory experience, pursuing increasing levels of generalization, and, thusly, need to employ the corresponding strategies and methods. Practitioners using this type of knowledge need to mind the actual extent of that causality.

Another one, and the most incipient, is analyticism illustrated by pragmatism and its transagent. The label denotes the unity of organism (human) and environment (context), a fundamental characteristic conveying the idea of constant mutual change and constitution. Researchers work within this paradigm has to be concerned with people as embedded in their context, which includes awareness of their own research practices, theories and methods and their influence on the findings. This entails an emphasis on understanding complexity and

bounded generalizations at most and the use of techniques and strategies to those ends. Practitioners employing findings so produced should acknowledge those biases as part of the generation of insights as well as their own as part of their consumption (Garcés 2019; 2021).

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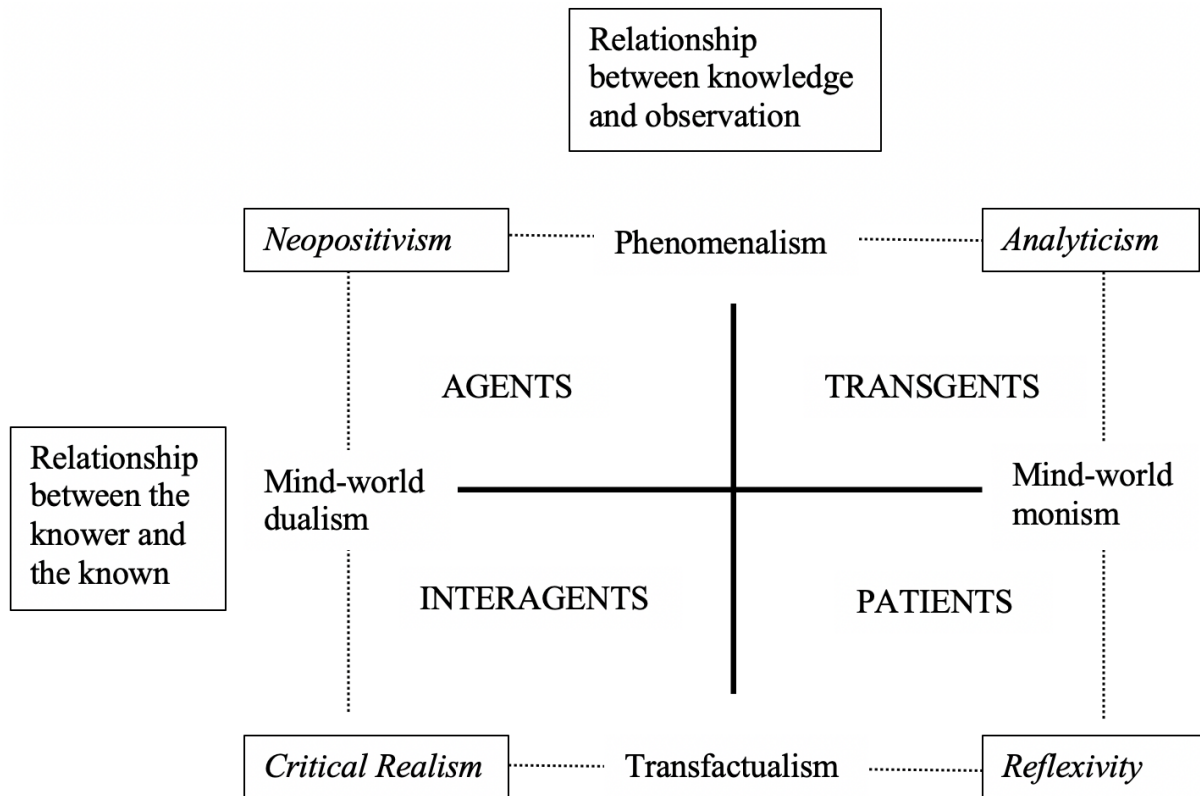
**Figure 1. Jackson's (2011) matrix of philosophical ontological wagers and the philosophies of science resulting from their combination**

		Relationship between knowledge and observation	
		Phenomenalism	Transfactualism
Relationship between the knower and the known	Mind-world dualism	Neopositivism	Critical Realism
	Mind-world monism	Analyticism	Reflexivity

Source: Jackson (2011)

Elaboration: author

**Figure 2. Human agency according philosophical ontological wagers and the philosophies of science resulting from their combination**



Elaboration: author