

Norm circles and critical realism

Abstract for 2025 IACR conference

There is increasing interest in the concept of *norm circles*, including an increasing number of papers and books that have employed the concept in empirical research. Norm circles are defined as social structures, composed of human agents, that tend to encourage people to conform with norms. As such, they provide a (partly) structural explanation for social normativity, which in turn plays an important role in many other social structures. Researchers who come across the concept, however, often ask how it relates to other elements of critical realist theory.

This paper addresses these questions by providing an introduction to some of the various relationships between norm circle theory and the work of three leading critical realists: Roy Bhaskar, Margaret Archer, and Tony Lawson. With reference to Bhaskar's work, it presents norm circles as entities with emergent causal powers, and as social structures that are concept and activity dependent. With reference to Archer's, it shows how the morphogenetic approach applies to their development but also considers the more ambivalent relationship between norm circles and Archer's understanding of structure and culture. With regard to Lawson's, norm circles help to explain why people go along with the positional rights and obligations that are the centrepiece of his social positioning theory.

Overall, the paper argues that, with the exception of Archer's work on the ontology of culture, norm circle theory is consistent with all of these contributions. It provides illustrations of how some of their more abstract ontological work can be applied to concrete empirical social cases, and in doing so extends critical realist social ontology. Given the centrality of normativity to social structures, it also provides a base for further extensions.

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