

# Ontology

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## Introduction

Ontology – or, to use the older term that by some is considered to be broader, “metaphysics” – is a part of philosophy concerned with what there is, how it is, and what forms of being there are. To offer an aphoristic definition, having an ontology is “to make sense of things” (Moore, 2012). Ontology refers not only to sense-making, but in many cases to the constitution of the worlds, and sometimes also the constitution of empirical objects.

Ontology has been a central issue since the dawn of philosophy and from the seventeenth century and the scholastic tradition on. Auguste Comte coined the term “sociology” as an activity directed against metaphysical speculation, though not against metaphysics itself. Although early sociologists were acquainted with philosophy, most contemporary social scientists have discussed ontology from what would be best described as an extension of epistemic questions or an empirical field of study. The discussion of ontology in the social sciences is only tenuously connected to any knowledge of philosophical ontology; this could be remedied by paying closer attention to philosophical works before taking an ontological turn into the social sciences. A philosophical discussion would, for example, question the possibility of simply expanding empirical research into ontology.

In one sense, all sociologists are doing social ontology, since they study how the social world is. However, ontology, if the term is to have any useful meaning at all, is restricted to essential conditions rather than empirical conditions. Already in the first text that seriously deals with social ontology, *Social Ontology and the Criteria for Definitions in Sociology*, Joseph Gittler, states: “Setting up definitions in terms of the nature of the social is what we mean by social ontology” (Gittler, 1951: 358). This refers to

the ultimate social “stuff,” or to the essential attributes of the social, which are indispensable to empirical research. It is, however, only very recently that ontology in the social sciences has become a topic in its own right, due primarily to the development of “post-” theories and social constructivist schools and, later, to developments such as science and technology studies (STS).

## Concepts and History in Philosophy

The first occurrence of the term “ontology” is associated with the publication of the book *Ontologie* by Christian Wolff in 1730. Ontology is a scholastic term of ancient Greek origin; it is a compound of *to on* (“being, that which is,” neuter participle of the Greek verb “to be,” *einai*) and a modern formation on the Greek *logos* (“word,” “theory,” “science,” etc.) that can be found in all the “-logy” words. The term has the same linguistic structure as, for example, “sociology” and “biology” and refers primarily to an activity deployed by researchers who have a set of assumptions for, or methods of, investigating “the world.” In a secondary sense, “ontology” designates specific ontological positions or “ontologies” – that is, sets of ideas about what there is.

The history of what is called ontology today, especially in the social sciences, is grounded in the much more extensive field of metaphysics, which has its roots in ancient Greek philosophy. It was Kant who first presented a metaphysical position that had a more direct impact on the social sciences. Kant claimed that there is an independently existing world, but we cannot gain access to it. This means that Kant combined an ontological argument with an epistemological argument; but it also means that he shunned metaphysics.

Peirce argued that reality is in development and that ontology is indeterminate. Reality – including its laws and objects – is not independent of researchers, but rather something on which they come to agree by virtue of their scientific enterprise. The pragmatist position is also vindicated by William James, and it essentially boils down to an epistemic position on how we

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gain knowledge. Knowledge is a result of human interaction; and the world as we know it is a consequence of this interaction. Much of the social sciences' ideas on ontology are of this kind; social things are man-made, and this is as much an assumption as it is a finding.

Carnap and other logical positivists attempted to exclude metaphysics from philosophy. In an essay titled "On What There Is" (see Quine, 2004), Quine stresses that the ontological question, seen from his pragmatic-positivist perspective, is about the adoption of the simplest conceptual scheme into which the fragments of experience can be arranged. Generally the analytic tradition tends to reduce ontology to linguistic problems.

More radical approaches to ontology can be found among continental philosophers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger. Nietzsche's role in the social sciences is mainly indirect, since he has influenced postmodern thinking and, to a lesser extent, poststructural thinking. Nietzsche stresses the sense-making. He argues that ontology should be understood from a given value perspective, in contrast to a process of discovery. No thinker is associated more with ontology than Martin Heidegger (2001). He presents an attempt to undercut the traditional approach to ontology, which means to ask "what is the being of entities." Heidegger proposes that we should ask the more fundamental questions about the meaning of being. But any understanding of being presupposes our existence, which leads him to the study of our own being (*Dasein*, or "being there"). Heidegger also rejects the mentalist-epistemic tradition of Descartes and Kant, who try to get access to the "world" that somehow is detached from us. Heidegger, in contrast, starts with our own being engaged in practical activities and living in the world. The question of being cannot be reduced to the human ego, according to Heidegger. Man is always "in the world." It is not that one is first an ego, who then in a second step reaches out to other egos. World and humans are co-constitutive. Heidegger argues that the ontology of humans is essentially relational and must be understood in connection with concrete people, social conventions (the abstract individual, or what he calls in German *das Man*), and things. Heidegger's phenomenology offers the foundation of a relational ontology (Aspers and

Kohl, 2013) in which relations are constitutive of what there is.

The works of Roy Bhaskar (1998) represent a form of transcendental or critical realism. This approach is a blend of ontology and epistemology, it gives priority to ontology. The approach suggests that we should ask the transcendental question of what the structure of the world must be like for knowledge to be possible. Several sociologists, for example Margaret Archer and Andrew Sayer, have been influenced by this approach. One leading idea is stratification of social reality into emergent explanatory levels.

A philosopher who has had a strong impact on how social scientists think about ontology is John Searle (see, e.g., Searle, 1998). He makes a distinction between "brute" or "objective" facts – things that are what they are independently of human activity, like our distance to the sun – and "institutional facts," for example that one €10 note is valid for purchase. The latter exists only by virtue of the fact that the human mind and social interaction result in collective beliefs. Searle sees at least the social domain as socially constructed. He offers an idea of social ontology that is about conditions for empirical instances. The ontology that Searle (2006) proposes is not grounded in empirical study of concrete cases.

Another approach to (or perspective on) ontology is found among some philosophers of science, who analyze the assumptions of social science theories, including their own ontological assumptions. This kind of approach is exemplified by Mäki (2001).

### Ontology in the Social Sciences

In addition to philosophical ideas of ontology, there are positions and attempts to study ontology in the social sciences. Karl Mannheim (1936) talked about ontology as deeply rooted in the institutions of ideology. In *The Structure of Social Action* Talcott Parsons (1968) discussed the most general philosophical issue, ontology, but only to defend his own realist position. Parsons assumes the existence of a firm "ontological base" (realism), which means that he focuses on epistemic matters. He describes his position as "analytic realism," which implies that scientific theories



are not part of the world they describe (Parsons, 1968: 753–754).

Giddens takes a phenomenological approach to ontology and sees it as bound to questions of identity and existentiality. His notion of “ontological security” is defined as “expressing an autonomy of bodily control with predictable routines” and as “confidence or trust that the natural and social worlds are as they appear to be, including the basic existential parameters of self and social identity” (Giddens, 1984: 50, 575). Giddens is thus not doing ontology but evaluating its existential importance.

Luhmann’s (1995) systems theory implies that everything that belongs to one system is at the same time the environment of another. According to Luhmann, any difference – which is the condition of identity – leads to “de-ontologization,” because objects are always “different things” according to the different systems in question. Systems theory implies that there are no things.

Several prominent researchers in the field of science and technology studies (STS) have discussed ontology in a special issue of the leading journal *Social Studies of Science*, namely 43 (3). The dominant view in the field appears to be that the STS approach that analyzes social construction empirically can also be employed to study the ontology of social life.

At stake in the social sciences’ discussion of ontology is, ultimately, philosophy. The extreme sociological position is to see philosophy as a social field and to argue that all philosophical ideas should be analyzed by traditional social science tools. Bourdieu’s (1991) analysis of Martin Heidegger’s work as a consequence of social positions in the field of philosophy exemplifies this approach.

## Conclusion

There is a distinction between those who discuss ontology as an investigation of what there is – “descriptive ontology” – and those who essentially speak of how to change ontology – “revisionary ontology.” In the first group we find researchers who argue that ontology is about basic conditions; in the second group we find researchers who argue that ontology is made in social interaction.

Sociological ontological research is empirical and, largely, an extension of ordinary work, though the empirical object of research is ontology. It is difficult to see that the attempts by sociologists to study ontology have resulted in quality improvements of sociological research. At the same time, it must be said that philosophers, at least those concerned with “social ontology,” have over time become more sociological and have started to talk about institutions, performativity, and power.

It is clear that the social scientists who have taken an interest in ontology have not addressed the complexity of humans, the ontology of the world in which human beings and scientific methods and theories are included. To see ontology as yet another subject in an empirical area of research that social scientists address with the same tools they ordinarily use elsewhere is unlikely to further the social sciences, since it also means a bracketing of philosophical insights.

SEE ALSO: Epistemology

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