

## Q & A after lecture 1

### Yeon:

*What is the purpose/final goal of ontology? Is it for drawing many agreements from people as much as we can? Or is it for providing a good foundation/premise to understand the world?*

*I think that an answer to this question help to choose a right method from reductionism, determinism, etc.*

The point of ontology used to be to actually tell what there is in the physical universe. That role has now been taken over by the natural sciences. In the social sciences, ontology, as we shall see in the next three lectures, is intermingled with epistemology. Are people just statistics, or rational beings (in some sense), or emotional beings, or social beings, or what? Reductionism is not the answer for any interpretive social science studies. And determinism is probably best left at J. S. Mill's level: "Maybe everything is determined by underlying causes, but as far as social phenomena are concerned, we'll never master them all."

### Jukka:

*Can we really criticize any of these Ontology descriptions of world? They have been the best knowledge (science) in their time related to circumstances (religion, ethics). Our current natural scientific descriptions of the world can turn to be wrong later on, and/or our ethics can change for good or bad. Should we stop believing on anything?*

*If everyone would believe that people exist only subjectively, and that would also be the truth, would it then mean that there is not any event or occasion in the world with single existence; only with as many variations as there are people involved.*

*Confused and not yet in anyhow higher level.*

As we will establish during the next three lectures, epistemology gives us tools to criticize some ontologies. Once we learn how people collect their knowledge of the world, we see how some of the ways can be more rational, defensible, etc. than others. For instance, our current natural world view may have minor or major flaws, but it seems to get many things done. In fact, some people flew to the moon with Newtonian physics, which has since been replaced but not discredited as an approximation. So there is something in that world view which might survive, parring a scientific revolution, of which in the next lecture.

Existing subjectively is a fact that you and I know to be true by feeling that existence – unless solipsism is correct and I am writing this to myself. ;) The variations part is true at least epistemologically. We'll see as we continue how ontology and epistemology are pretty inseparable at least in the social sciences.

Confused – good! That is the path to the next level.

### Patricija:

*I have a question, but it is not really precise, I would just like to get some comments on the thoughts that I had.*

*What should be thought to be a disability? Although we seem to believe that it must be related to something abnormal, we often do not have any strict bounds to what normal is. Maybe it should focus on how well you can adapt to the current world rather than labelling your features as wrong or right? In this case, if as an introvert one finds it difficult to call the doctor's office or do grocery shopping and the alternatives do not exist, "being an introvert" could be thought to be a disability and the person should be provided the necessary gadgets or services that help them adapt to the way the world is today.*

Yes, you are spot on. There are two ways of approaching disability, a medical view and a social view. A few years ago, I summarized them and suggested that they can be combined like this:

“A working definition could then be that people have disabilities if they have a physical or mental impairment that, due to contributing social factors or due to lack of compensatory social factors, seriously and enduringly impedes their everyday functioning. Both contributing and compensatory social factors range from private attitudes to physical constructions and public policies.” (Häyry & Vehmas 2015, 2.)

So yes, if introversion were a mental impairment – which I flatly deny – the cure could be both medical (Happy Pills?) or social (other people not imposing on “my territory”). It is also possible that introversion is just an instance of human variety and that it should be recognized as such. Then the cure would be to end the hegemony of extroverts. To the barricades!

Oh, my, that became quite a rant. But you know what I mean. I will attach the paper and add it to the Q and A folder.

**Perttu:**

*A general question. Does ontology provide answers to the question of balancing theoretical and practical reasons:*

*When practical and theoretical reasoning are at odds with each other, which is more important?*

It depends on what you mean by “theoretical” and “practical”. As we’ll learn next week, practical in the sense of empirical can be used to test theories. If we rely on observation, we then favor the practical over the theoretical.

If you had something different in mind, please specify and I will try again.

Perttu (response edited from Finnish):

*My idea of the “practical” and the “theoretical” had to do with Aristotle’s classification – can there be discrepancies between the two types or argumentation. I had in mind a case in which a flawless theoretical justification does not necessarily work in practice.*

In a strictly Aristotelian context, I can think of only the following scenario. The theoretical syllogism is:

Every A wants X.

Every A knows that they will not get X unless they do P.

Therefore, every A does P.

The practical syllogism contradicting this could be:

M is an A.

Therefore, M does P.

However, M does not do P.

With this, we return to the idea of empirical testing and its power to make us reconsider the premises. Further investigation may show that M is not a virtuous man. M may be a weakly-

willed man, a natural slave, or a woman (which for Aristotle means constantly weakly-willed). All this means is that the theoretical syllogism was not flawless to begin with. Its form should have been:

Every virtuous A wants X.

Every virtuous A knows that they will not get X unless they do P.

Therefore, every virtuous A does P.

Knowing that M is not virtuous, M's practical syllogism does not dent the refined theoretical model.

Was that it or do you somehow want to dig deeper?

**Miriam:**

*There are two questions I wrote down during the videos.*

*First, you showed us some of the progress that there has been on ontology and classifications made. Is there any belief that there will ever be some kind of "solution" or is this at least a goal that ontologists strive for, meaning some kind of ultimate ontological answer existing? Or is it generally acknowledged that ontology is a progress (how I would have understood it) with its thoughts adapting to time?*

*I hope the question is clear, this was a bit hard for me to put into words.*

*And second (more of a side question), you in the beginning talked about your view being a Western one and thus representative of that. Is there differences in Western or Eastern views today still? I can imagine that in the beginning of Ontology, a philosophers location would impact their thinking greatly, but would have assumed that this does not have that much of an impact today still.*

Ontology can be a process that improves our understanding but will never reach completion (scientific realism) or it can be another kind of process, more political and ideological (social constructivism). More on these during the next three lectures.

Insofar as globalization has reached most corners of the world, the Western way of seeing things is, no doubt, prevalent. However, at least at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania I seem to recall meeting university lecturers who had very traditional regional or continental views on what there is in the world (maybe including ancestral spirits). As we proceed, you will find that epistemology, and especially epistemological views rejecting positivism, can produce interesting variations to ontology, as well.

**Misa:**

*My post-lesson inquiry concerns the progression of themes found on slide 110 where you state that people exist objectively, subjectively and intersubjectively. As I understood intersubjective existence it posits that people exist within a part of social system (e.g. communal network). However, in order for that to be true social network or communal life must either exist beforehand or it is people's existence that creates them. Either way I wonder if the network itself (or the social norms) have a particular form which can be decoupled from the agents. **Does the trialism approach allow for people generated networks to have an existence that is separate from the individuals that make up its***

*parts? For example could a social network full of people who are deemed completely unethical, produce an ethical social system?*

A complicated one. First, a hen-egg problem: "Which came first?" Let's answer that tentatively by "They emerged together at the dawn of humanity." Then for individuals now born into this world. They arrive at the table when it is already set. We are brought to exist in the communal and social networks that precede us. These can be carved in stone and remain dissociated from us like in the case of despotic laws and rules, and less stringently in customs and traditions. The law-defined community in the former case could be an example of a people-generated network that has independent existence. And it can be ethical, unethical, or nonethical, you name it. But communities, even despotic ones, are in constant flux, which means that in the end people can change their circumstances. For the study of social phenomena, though, some of the most immediately interesting trialist entities are the networks that seem to bind people pretty tightly. They give us grounds for explanations and predictions.

**Thu:**

*On the topic of subjectivity, how do we know that other people observe us? How do we know that we self-observe? If people are products of our self-observation, do babies self-observe? How do we know that?*

Since this was a lecture on ontology, we do not know yet. We may know after the epistemology lecture. But more precisely to your questions:

We do not have to know that other people observe us to exist as objects of other people's observations. Comatose people exist under medical and social observation without knowing it.

If we know that we self-observe, we know it by self-observation. This was Rene Descartes' famous idea and it is explained here: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/descartes-epistemology/#CogiErgoSum>

It is generally believed (at least in my bioethics circles) that human beings gain the capacity to self-awareness or self-observation at 6-12 months at the earliest. So, according to that wisdom, no, babies do not self-observe. But this depends on the definition, so don't take my word for it. This is based on psychological studies on human and nonhuman animals. Chimpanzees and gorillas do. Dolphins and whales do. Crows probably do. Human babies do not.

A couple of projects in which I have been involved (original signatory in both) the great apes and cetaceans have been vindicated:

<https://www.projetogap.org.br/en/>

<https://www.cetaceanrights.org/conference.php>

**Lauri:**

*I just went through the lectures 0 and 1. First of all, working in a quant team as a qualitative researcher, the topic of showing the relevance and credibility of qual research is of utmost importance - and something I think about daily doing my research and collaborating with technology/numbers oriented professionals.*

Since you present a commentary rather than a question, I will respond below paragraphs.

*Firstly, I will start off with less of a question and more of a comment. You categorize Psychology as dealing with "How we can know about something". However, psychology is also concerned with discovering what truly exists in the world. For instance, psychology of personality may seek to discover fundamental traits that differentiate and unify people or social psychology seeks to uncover group level behavior, also called biases. Thus, psychology also considers ontological matters, focusing on behavior, cognition, and emotion. Also, psychology may not be differentiated from science, but is a subcategory of it.*

If you say so. It is clear that psychology has both physiological (matter) and mental (mind) leanings and deals with ontology in the sense of what exists in the psyche.

*Also, I would like to point out that the Myers-Brig model is not endorsed by the psychologist, in fact, it has been discredited. Currently, the Big Five model has found more support.*

Yes, well, for all my intents and purposes the Big Five is the Myers Briggs in testosterones.

*Working with a medical device for depression, your brief reflection on the classification of mental disorders is intriguing. Generally, it is thought that mental disorders are founded because they cause suffering and challenges in coping with everyday life. An opposing view is that the differences between people are natural and should not be considered abnormalities. Without going to the ontology of mental disorders that have changed substantially over the years, perhaps reflecting zeitgeist more than the mental entities themselves, here is my first question: Do "mental disorders" exist, and why?*

Your description is very clinical. I thought that social scientists would lean more to the Foucauldian direction and recognize that when features are defined as mental disorders the point is often to normalize a hegemonic way of being (say, extroverted) and demonize all others (say, introversion).

*Taking a pragmatic approach to the question, we can consider that mental disorders are both invented and real. Moreover, they are embedded in popular thinking, institutions, professions, practices, public discussion, and regulations, for instance. Underlying the notions is a belief in the individualism in people: disorders belong to individual (and their brain), rather than being socially influenced. Thus, there is a huge gap between the neurological, psychotherapeutic, and sociological views to mental health: first claims that the problem is caused by abnormalities in the brain, second considers (individual) behavior and thinking patterns, third considers the inequalities and social environments that all influence the individual. Considering the three are equally true:*

Yes, these are all true.

*How to create a holistic understanding to social phenomena that bridges the disciplines of science? (Wherein one discipline looks at the trunk of the elephant, another its ear, and third its stomach, none seeing the elephant itself due to extensive specialization.)*

That is indeed one of the questions. I hope the course clarifies the matter.

**Sakke:**

*To what extent the concepts of epistemology and ontology are related to each other?*

To a confusing extent. We'll learn all about it in Lecture 2.

**Anoop:**

*I was always a bit bemused by the usage "ontological assumptions". After this session, I kind of understand what ontology is, but still kind of struggling with what are "ontological assumptions". Ontology pertains to what exists, and what is the nature of it. If this can be known, what is the need to "assume" a particular ontology? (When I used the "IF" in the previous question did I make an epistemological assumption?)*

*I am trying to answer this myself first. Please let me know if I am right. There can be three ontological assumptions possible about the nature of existence of human beings. That is, they exist as objective, subjective, or inter-subjective. These will remain as assumptions if we cannot establish any one of these nature of existence as the true nature.*

*However, then the question is how does this assumption matter? Is it possible to give an example how a theory which finds acceptance in the modern scientific community can be challenged based on a change in the ontological assumption of human existence?*

When you start studying the phenomena that are the subject matter of your research, you need to choose the angle from which you approach the matter. If you are studying workers in an industrial hall or open-plan office, for instance, you must establish whether you want to see them as physical bodies producing goods and services ("objective"), psychological beings with thoughts and feelings ("subjective"), social beings in a network ("intersubjective"), or a combination thereof. By making this choice, you make your first fundamental ontological assumption. There can be others as the work continues, depending on your research questions and focus.

**Anoop (continued):**

*Thank you for the response. This does clarify what is an ontological choice, or position. But I am still not clear what we are "assuming" here to call it an "ontological assumption". That human beings are physical bodies, psychological beings and social beings, can all be considered as facts. For my particular study I might choose one of these perspectives, which is relevant for my study. Why do we call it an assumption?*

Quantitative research typically makes the ontological assumption that only one reality exists and that it is independent of human perception (that would be the "objective" in my "realism"). Qualitative research most often proceeds from the more lenient, or wider, ontological assumption that human experiences ("subjective") and relations ("intersubjective") belong to the sphere of what exists, as well. The results are different depending on what assumption the researcher takes. We'll learn more about this during the next lectures.

**Hanh:**

*As I am still in the process of choosing the right method for my research (quantitative or qualitative). I'm curious about the method being used in Ontology, my questions are:*

*What is the method being used in Ontology? Is it mainly observation as Ontology seeks to answer the questions of what (What is there in the world?, What is it like?) In this way, how can ontologists observe unobservable phenomena such as God and soul?*

*Is the study of Religion considered a science? (From my understanding of the lecture, in the beginning, Ontology is divided into Religion and Science, so what belongs to Religion is not*

*Science or is there any interaction relationship between Religion and Science within Ontology?)*

Religion is not a science. The study of religion is a science. Religion deals with ontological matters. The study of religion usually does not, or at least not any more. Modern theology does not ponder the existence of God or angels. Religions do have their ideas about that.

Ontology as a branch of philosophy gives conceptual descriptions of what there might be in the world – matter, minds, spirit, a combination of these. It is nowadays very close to epistemology and partly intertwined with it. “How do we know what there is?” is both an ontological and an epistemological question. Lecture two will either clarify the matter or confuse it more. Either way, it does what philosophy is supposed to do to you. It makes you think.

**Katri:**

*At the very beginning of the lecture you mentioned the perspective of a white western man. I am currently reading about black feminism and this has broadened my understanding of how different our perspectives still are depending from where we are and who we are. The dialogue between feminism and black feminism would change the understanding of what feminism is. This leads me to my question:*

*Some researchers claim that ontology requires consensus of the conceptualization. Have we reached a consensus or are we in some point of a process of finding this consensus and defining ontology? I'm thinking about gender as an example, in practice (and maybe scientifically) there has been two genders, but now in practice gender identity is not restricted to male and female or X as something that is neither of these. Through this current dialogue the understanding of gender is changing. If ontology is a process, through with kind of a dialogue does it change?*

Research makes ontological assumptions and then sees the studied phenomena through the chosen lens.

If we assume a women-men-dichotomy, there are no Xs – there are only women and men who erroneously believe that they are Xs. Working within this model, we would probably end up medicalizing X as an abnormal condition in need of a cure. Which is exactly what medical and biological sciences until very recently did and still sometimes do.

If we assume a women-men-X-none-cut, our world is suddenly populated by (at least) four types of human beings. The change seems to happen politically rather than through scientific progress. I think. I am not an expert. You could ask Johanna Ahola-Launonen during her second lecture, two weeks from now.

**Udyant:**

*How can Ontology and Epistemology help a machine to emulate human brain?*

It is all about assumptions. As long as scientists assumed that humans have souls (and that the human brain has something to do with it) emulating the human brain would have been conceptually impossible. You could have put the components together, and it could have performed tasks, but it would not have been truly “human”. Now that most of them have assumed a more mechanistic view, the task can be approached structurally or functionally without the residue of some special “humanness”. See: Frankenstein; Turing Machine; etc.