

What is the difference between "ontology" and "epistemology"?

25 ANSWERS



Clément Renaud, intermittent hack philosopher

Written Jan 14, 2013

Originally Answered: Is there a difference between ontology and epistemology?

Ontology and epistemology are both important elements of the philosophy of knowledge. If they often overlap, they have clear distinction : epistemology is about *the way we know* things when ontology is about *what things are*.

Epistemology is a field of science that tends to describe the many approaches we can chose to understand our world. It is by definition the science of knowledge and consequently is often understood as a meta-science : the science of defining what is the "scientific way". Mostly, it studies the fundamental choices or givens you take into account when you attempt to know something.

For example, cybernetics use the model of a system as an epistemological approach to explain facts and phenomenons. Derived from it, science today use widely the network model as a premise to understand various things, for instance cities. When we say: "*Ok, let's try to understand the structure of modern cities as a network*" this is epistemology in practice - to chose a bias.

Then start the ontological debate : "*But modern cities **are** actually structured as networks !*" Now that is it : we are all set up for a boring egg and chicken debate, one saying : "*It is like this*" and the other saying "*It is just because you look at it that way*". This happens all the time.

Ontology is about describing things and their relationships to answer the question "*What is it?*" while epistemology's personal concern is to investigate the ways that leads you to think that.

Imagine the ontology saying "*This is that*", then the epistemology will answer : "*How can you be so sure of what it is if you don't even know how you know it?*"

Let's take a famous quote from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* : "*The world is the totality of facts, not of things*". This is an ontological assertion - it challenges the nature of the world (*what it is*) - then it leads us to an epistemological consideration - to reconsider *how* we have looked at the world before.

That makes a difference, isn't it?

Actually, ontology at some extremes can be regarded as a particular epistemological posture. After all,

ontology implies that you first accept that things can "be", i.e. can be defined by their beings. Even if it seems obvious, many languages don't have such definitive verb about the nature of things.

You could absolutely oppose to this idea in saying that things are fully made of contingency, that context prevails, or that things exist in your personal experience (as W. James said in its radical empiricism). Then, ontology will become like a pointless joke.

So finally, it seems like the overlap of those 2 questions are in fact the origin of metaphysics. The question: *"Are things really like this or is that just the way I see them?"* will always be a fruitful one.

Personally, I have sometimes the feeling that we are in a very "ontological" period where people loves to define things very precisely using "data" as an epistemological alibi. Some place, some time, it should be some other way to know our world and then things could get different. That is usually why people come to ask question like yours - and why others try to answer it :)

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Joshua Engel, worked at The Rude Mechanicals

Written Aug 30, 2011

Ontology is the study of what there is in the world. Epistemology is the study of how you know it.

Topics in ontology include:

- What does it mean to be a "thing"?
- How do things persist over time?
- How do things change over time?

Topics in epistemology include:

- What does it mean to know something?
- What does it mean to mean something?
- Do we actually really know anything at all for certain?

The two are intimately related. Any statement of ontology (e.g. "Bees are a kind of insect") is intended to be a statement of "truth", and epistemology is trying to figure out what it means to be "true". But the notion of "truth" is inherently grounded in our idea that there's some kind of world out there for which the distinction between "truth" and "not-truth" is relevant. It's hard to know what epistemology would mean if you really were a brain in a vat with no sensory inputs (but that doesn't stop epistemologists from trying to figure it out).

So the boundaries between the two are fluid. Some ontologies of philosophy would group them both under the topic "metaphysics", but largely because "metaphysics" is just a catchall term for questions that don't go anywhere else. ("Metaphysics" just means "After Physics", all the questions that Aristotle found leftover after he wrote all of his other books, including Physics.) There's a huge amount of thought in all of these fields, so any serious study of them requires specialization, but you'll end up having to study all of them to some degree because there's no clear demarcation between them.

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Teagen Meyer, Philosophy undergrad

Written Oct 1, 2015

(tl;dr read the bolded paragraph)

Ontological questions ask about the nature of being. Given this, we can state clearly that ontology is a subset of metaphysics, whereas epistemology is its own branch of philosophy which asks about knowledge and the nature of true/false statements.

Adding onto the questions stated by [Joshua Engel](#), ontology asks:

- What can be said to exist?
- What is a thing?
- Into what categories, if any, can we sort existing things?
- What are the meanings of being?
- What are the various modes of being of entities?
- What is existence, i.e. what does it mean for a being to be?
- Is existence a property?
- Is existence a genus or general class that is simply divided up by specific differences?
- Which entities, if any, are fundamental?
- Are all entities objects?
- How do the properties of an object relate to the object itself?
- Do physical properties actually exist?

- What features are the essential, as opposed to merely accidental attributes of a given object?
- How many levels of existence or ontological levels are there? And what constitutes a "level"?
- What is a physical object?
- Can one give an account of what it means to say that a physical object exists?
- Can one give an account of what it means to say that a non-physical entity exists?
- What constitutes the *identity* of an object?
- When does an object go *out* of existence, as opposed to merely *changing*?
- Do beings exist other than in the modes of objectivity and subjectivity, i.e. is the subject/object split of modern philosophy inevitable?

Epistemology asks:

- What is knowledge?
- How is knowledge acquired?
- What do people know?
- What are the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge?
- What is its structure, and what are its limits?
- What makes justified beliefs justified?
- How we are to understand the concept of justification?
- Is justification internal or external to one's own mind?

With this in mind, we can identify a difference between the two. Ontology, and metaphysics, help us to understand what there is, and what it is like. Epistemology helps us to understand how we know this is true.

Continuing on, we can say that ethics helps us to understand, out of what there is what is valuable. Aesthetics helps us to understand what defines beauty. Logic, in my opinion, is a subfield of the [formal sciences](#) ↗ not a subfield of philosophy because logic has definite answers whereas philosophy does not. You can objectively prove a logical statement but you cannot objectively prove an ethical one. I hope this helps.

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Quinn Rusnell, advocate for paraconsistent inductive models of knowledge



Written Feb 19, 2015

Originally Answered: Why does western philosophy distinguish between ontology and epistemology?

The "why" part of your question is ambiguous. It is not clear if you are looking for a historical reason for western philosophers distinguishing between ontology (or metaphysics) and epistemology, or a rationale for the distinction.

On the historical side, even from PreSocratic, we see philosophers and philosophical schools emphasizing one over the other (at least according to Aristotle's account of PreSocratic philosophers). It is not clear from written history when the distinction first was made. Some attribute it to Xenophanes, but I find it hard to believe that human minds didn't ask "how do you know P?" nearly as early as they could speak. Epistemology seems quite instinctual, especially for young children! Are there other species who exhibit epistemological instincts as well? Perhaps, if you include deception detection as an epistemological instinct. So epistemology might not have originated with western philosophers, philosophers, or even humans. My guess is that it evolved as an instinct to detect deception and avoid prey tactics of competing predator species.

Whatever the actual historical story, based only on it's present function, we can reasonably assume that epistemology evolved as a filter for our ontology. Semantically, the question of "what is real?" is a subset of the question "how do we know what is real?". If it moves, selects food, and selects mates (probably all species with brains), a species exhibits behaviour indicating that it has an ontology. There are many of these. If it exhibits doubt, a species might question its ontology. There are relatively few of these. So historically, it's likely epistemology was built on top of ontology.

Neurologically, the prefrontal cortex performs a filtering function over the older parts of the brain. So it seems likely that epistemology evolved with the prefrontal cortex somewhere over the huge span of this process. While some of our ontology seems prehistoric and instinctual, some of it is also abstract. So it seems that our ontology is both core and prefrontal, suggesting a co-evolution of ontology and epistemology.

If my evolutionary story is at least partly right, philosophers did not invent the distinction. They merely sought to define the distinction (which is typical behaviour for western philosophers). Whether or not you believe there is a genuine distinction partly depends on your epistemology. Historically, most philosophers maintain a basic distinction between a priori knowledge (prior to experience) and a posterior knowledge (after experience). Philosophers who have emphasized a priori knowledge tend to be more interested in ontology. Philosophers who emphasize a posteriori knowledge tend to be more interested in epistemology. There are exceptions in both cases.

Knowledge of logic and math are the primary examples of a priori knowledge. While abstract concepts, such as 'truth' and 'numbers', cannot be pointed to and verified empirically, they remain useful tools in empirical and non-empirical proofs. Without these non-empirically verifiable abstracts, modern western scientific methods would not be possible. Probability, statistics, and other inductive methods would not exist. So a science like physics depends on ontological abstracts (metaphysics) prior to making its observations and proofs. Whether or not these abstracts are "real" in the physical sense doesn't matter.

It is easy for pure empiricists to get into a recursion when applying their epistemology to universal questions. Anything you assert as real can be questioned with "how do you know its real?" But how you

know something is also based on what is real, i.e., that your brain is built in such and such a way in a universe which is such and such. But then you ask, "how do you know your brain is built in such and such a way in a universe which is such and such?" This recursion indicates a codependency, probably because they were co-evolved systems. A codependency, however, does not prevent us from defining our terms and thereby distinguishing between ontology and epistemology.

If your epistemology requires that every term has an empirically observable definition (or instantiation), you do not get universals because universals are never directly observable. Without universals, you do not get empirical methods because empirical methods rely on universals such as 'truth' and 'numbers'. Without empirical methods, you do not get scientific knowledge because scientific knowledge relies on inductive proof (from 'some' cases to 'all'). Without scientific knowledge you do not get cosmological universals (such as physical laws) because cosmological universals are proved by induction (you cannot point to every instance of a physical law).

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Keinosuke Johan Miyana / 宮永 ヨハン 計之介, credentials are credible

Written Dec 28, 2014

Originally Answered: Why does western philosophy distinguish between ontology and epistemology?

You can't separate method from outcome. This is scientific fact: the method of determining what exists is exactly what determines what exists. Or said differently, there are only observations through which anything can be observed, and all observation is subject to its methods.

So philosophy is actually backtracking from science in this area. We already know enough about how the brain works, how computation works, and how information works, that any existence can be deconstructed as an output of a process, and not just a naive intuition of "what is". This crosses many fields. Computer science, cognitive science, and even physics.

Physics itself is a product of a method through which we determine what exists, namely the scientific method. But what is determined using this method is what *physically* exists. Then is the physical ontological or epistemological? At this point, we have a philosophical intuition that helps us see how much more there is to perception than the purely physical. We have so much more to think about.

And once you see physics as one of many perspectives, what we are left with is a universe that is polymorphous in nature. Just the other day, there was this:

[Wave-Particle Duality And Quantum Uncertainty - Two Sides Of The Same Mystery?](#) ↗

A particle or a wave? Both.

But it's not just the universe that is polymorphous. How we perceive is open to our manipulation, our will, and our architecture. So this polymorphism can be seen as having two parts. An objective polymorphism of the universe which accounts for the multitude of ways in which the universe presents itself, and a subjective polymorphism of the observer which accounts for the multitude of ways in which we can happen to see the world.

What exists is not a simple question. It's a science in and of itself, with many deep philosophical intuitions, and which involves many fields of study. But none of this is meaningless or pointless. This endeavor is leading us to better physics, to better computers, and to tangible products such as Artificial Intelligence. The distinction in question is made because it is productive.

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Kirk McDermid, Philosophy professor. AoS Philosophy of Science, Epistemology

Written Jun 12, 2014

Originally Answered: How do ontology and epistemology relate?

Ontology is the study of what entities exist. (E.g., does "chair" exist, as an entity, or is that a social construct and the only things that really exist are "wood", or even just "atom"?) Ontology is part of metaphysics (which studies other things about the nature of reality, like causation, time, etc.)

Epistemology is the study of knowledge - it's nature (e.g., is knowledge 'justified true belief', or something different? Do I have to know that I know 'P', to know 'P'? Etc.) So, they are related in many ways: one can ask how one has epistemic access to ontological facts; one can ask whether epistemic objects are real entities (e.g., are "beliefs" a distinct kind of thing, or (as some eliminativists might say) are they a diverse set of neural states that have no unifying ontology?)

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Moisi Cala, Major in philosophy.

Written Aug 9, 2016

One of the best ways in philosophy to explain something, is through language, so lets do some etymology:

We have 2 closed form compound words, ontology and epistemology, made of 3 words of greek origin, ontos, epistimi and logos, where epistimi is again a closed form compound word, lets brake them down shall we:

Ontos: ὄντως meaning *indeed, for sure, really, trully, being/existing, important.*

Epistimi: ἐπιστήμη, deriving from the word epistamai ἐπίσταμαι, *made of 2 words, epi (above, over) and sta/sto/sti (to stand, to be locative, to position oneself). Joined these 2 words give the meaning 'to stand over, to be on top, to position oneself above' and thats how you get to the more complex understanding of the word as 'science'. The word epistimi and gnosis, in ancient greek both can mean knowledge but with a big difference, epistimi being intelectual in nature.*

Logos: λόγος meaning (ground, meating place, place to stand, word, speach, opinion, discourse)

Now to put them together again:

Epistimi - logos, to have standing opinion, in a discourse with words, by prolonged exposure/

acquaintance with an idea/phenomena, proven by intellectual methods.

Ontos - logos, to have standing opinion, in a discourse with words on *the being, the indeed, the true, the real, the existent and therefore on the opposite of these*.

In my eyes is pretty clear that the words are selfexplanatory. Hope is as clear to you.

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Jan Goossenaerts, Founder at Wikinetix

Written Jan 20, 2015

Originally Answered: Why does western philosophy distinguish between ontology and epistemology?

My short answer would be that our globe and the universe doesn't need our "epistemic effort" (our effort to know) for its existence.

And once we try to know, we must use certain methods, and these impact the outcomes (as Keinosuke points out). As a consequence our knowing is rather relative. Or with other words; the same object can simultaneously be the subject of many "epistemic commitments". These can be mutually contradicting, or they can be complementary, etc.

In my own work, ontology matters.

Ontological Stratification is the partitioning of the landscape and the entities in it into several disjoint spaces (or strata) according to the criteria used to identify and conceptualize the entities, and according to these entities' possible roles in interactions.

Reflecting the long-accepted distinctions between material, information and monetary flows in socio-economic interactions, we adopt the three strata: material, content (knowledge, data, concept, information) and monetary (which is a social construct).

Read more: [Method & Overview - Ens Dictionary](#) ↗

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Steven Fox, MSc Strategic Management, UCD Michael Smurfit Graduate Business School (2016)

Written Aug 9, 2016

It's probably important to note that ontology and epistemology are important in all academic fields, not just philosophy. The whole point of a PhD is creation of new knowledge. To do that, you have to relate the knowledge to other knowledge, which is ontology. You then need a convincing argument as to why its true. This is the epistemology.

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