

Ontology and Epistemology (/Ontology+and+Epistemology)

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THE ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE SOCIAL WORLD

"Απο μικρό και απο κουζουλό μαθαίνεις την αλήθεια."
"From a child and a crazy person you know the truth."

WHAT IS ONTOLOGY?

"The word **Ontology** derives from the the Greek language: *onto* means 'being; that which is' and *logos* means 'science, study, theory' (Wikipedia, 2011, para.1). "Ontology is the study of being, the study of how things exist" (Heyman, 2009, p. 16).

"Some fundamental ontological questions are 'what is reality?', 'what are the characteristics of things that exist?' " (Willis, 2007, p.9).

For example, if someone has a positivist view of the world, the ontological assumptions would be based on the existence of social phenomena independent of our perceptions and values (Heyman, 2009). From this perspective everything in the social world would be meaningless and would exist in the same way as physical objects (Heyman, 2009).

WHAT IS EPISTEMOLOGY?



Image from website <http://sophoslogos.wordpress.com/tag/epistemology/>

"The word **Epistemology** has also a Greek etymology: *episteme* means 'knowledge, science', while *logos* mean 'study' (Wikipedia, 2011, para.1). "Epistemology refers to the study of knowledge, of how things exist" (Heyman, 2009, p.16).

"Epistemological questions are for example 'what is knowledge?', 'how do I acquire knowledge?' " (Willis, 2007, p.9), "how do we know what we

know?".

If we take the above example based on a positivist perspective, epistemology in the social world would be based on the belief that only a scientific approach would lead us to knowledge, as social phenomena are considered as "things", and things can be measured and defined scientifically (Lazar, 1998).

WHY ARE ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY IMPORTANT?

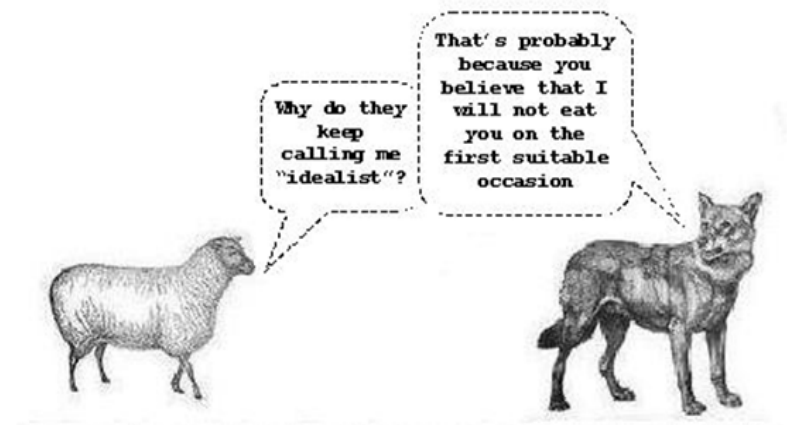


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Whenever we do research on a social phenomena, we would have to start with some ontological views about how reality exists, and those views, beliefs would subsequently lead us to some sort of knowledge. In this sense we can argue that "ontology precedes epistemology" (Heyman, 2009, p.16); according to how we will perceive the existence of the world, our search for knowledge will follow a certain path. The ontological and epistemological considerations are our starting point to study a certain topic (Heyman, 2009), and an in-depth understanding of these considerations becomes important to "defend our work against any possible criticism" (Heyman, 2009, pp.16-17).

Ontology and epistemology do not simply refer to some abstract philosophical thinking to make students' life difficult, but their implications can have an impact on our daily life. Let's think for example of education and of how governments perceive education. As Wotherspoon (1998) claims, the "analysis of the educational structures within a certain society is significant to understand the values and ideologies behind that society and how open and democratic that society is" (p.19). For instance Education and Schooling can be perceived from the interpretive perspective as a "site of perpetual adjustments as participants attempt to decipher and share meanings with one another and, in the process, shape their personality and lives" (Wotherspoon, 1998, p. 22). Education becomes therefore an ever changing process shaped by the individuals and their interactions.

However education can also be perceived differently in a more "positivist" way. Let's think for example of the 2001 No Child Left behind Act in the USA, where federal funds are granted only to projects which are based on rigorous and scientific approaches (Slavin, 2007). What is Education in this case? What counts as Education? Is it measurable? Is it a thing? Or is it a creation and recreation of human activity, where human beliefs and values gives meanings to it? The way we answer many of these questions becomes important whenever we want to explore in-depth our social world.

SOME WORDS TO THINK OF...

