

Benefits of ontology in social science



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

What is ontology? Why is it important for the social scientist to know about it?

Speaking out of modest personal experience as a political science graduate, the issue of ontology as well as epistemology (and the consequent choices social sciences scientists make) has been always in an arena of confusion for most social sciences graduates. Students, all over the world, feel alienated and often misguided regarding the nature of these terms and thus are often relatively late in determining their stands in this crucially important and inescapable subject. Furthermore, a simple investigation of typical course offerings of social sciences degrees around the globe exposes a general lack of methodology courses at the undergraduate level. This issue adds to the general confusion of students on the issue. Often, not until students move to postgraduate level when they are adequately trained in methodology of research and consecutively become able to develop understanding of ontology and epistemology. Furlong and Marsh (2002) explain the issue brilliantly when they say: “ At First these issues (ontological and epistemological positions) seem difficult but our major point is that they are not issues that can be avoided. They are like a skin not a sweater: they cannot be put on and taken off whenever the researcher sees fit.” (Furlong and Mars, 2002, p. 17). In this essay, we try to provide a general overview of ontology and shed light on its importance.

What is ontology?

If one is to define Ontology in Social sciences, it is important to step back to the philosophical origin. In philosophy, ontology is widely defined as a major branch of metaphysics, the study of the nature of reality. Encyclopaedia Britannica (2009) defines Ontology as the “ philosophical study of being” and <https://assignbuster.com/benefits-of-ontology-in-social-science/>

what generally prescribes to reality. Aristotle first called ontology “ first philosophy”, and later the Latin term “ ontologia” appeared after being invented by the German philosopher Lorhardus.

Furlong, and Marsh (2002) explain ontology a “ theory for being”, in other terms the main question of whether exists a reality that is autonomous from our understanding. To elaborate this idea in social sciences context, they give the example of gender identity and John Gray’s book “ Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus”. The book argues that men and woman are fundemantaly different from each other and asserts that if it would be better if both would recognize this difference. That argument subscribes to a foundationalist (essentialist) ontological stand. On the other hand Furlond and Marsh (2002) assert that feminists would fiercely attack such a view as they link differences between men and women are “ socially constructed”. This stand asserts an anti-foundationalist (constructivist) ontological position.

Foundationalism and anti-foundationalism represent the two main ontological positions taken by scientists, and to understand ontology one should explain those main ontological positions.

Importance

Epistemological consequences

The debate of who comes first, and the importance of Ontology in social research:

Needless to say, a social researcher’s ontology can be understood as their view of social world. This have a consequence on choosing the ways the researcher will do his research, the methods, used, and theories put forth.

Nevertheless by saying this we avoid hinting that ontology precedes or follows epistemology, an issue of debate among social scientists.

According to Bares and Jenkins (2007) learning of ontology (and epistemology) helps “ differentiate and choose between competing theories and analytical traditions” Additionally they assert that many introductory texts to Ontology and Epistemology seems to sponsor a directional relationship that asserts that ontology precedes epistemology in social research. In their opinion this hinders the learning process as discretely favours certain theoretical choices. They further assert that ontology (and epistemology) are important in ontology. (2009). In Encyclopædia Britannica. Retrieved December 11, 2009, from Encyclopædia Britannica Online: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/429409/ontology>

A Skin not a Sweater: Ontology and Epistemology in Political Science

Furlong, Paul and Marsh, David (2002) A Skin not a Sweater: Ontology and Epistemology in Political Science. In: Theory and Methods in Political Science. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 17-41. ISBN 0-333-94856-4