

ONTOLOGY, EPISTEMOLOGY AND AXIOLOGY IN RESEARCH

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Introduction

Research is always motivated by human curiosity. It is the curiosity to know more and know better about the social world we live in. It acts as the fundamental drive in our expansion of knowledge. This drive for-research and re-cognition is always manifest in science the formulation and innovation of new ideas and technologies. But in philosophy, this curiosity for cognition is not always readily manifest, but are to be discerned as the very inner design of research.

Philosophy, by its very definition, is the insatiable love for knowledge. It constantly seeks not just the social and human meaning of our natural world; it also constantly re-examines and redefines our ways of knowing them. As Malcolm Williams remarks, philosophical assumptions are the explicit, or implicit, starting point for research (135). Any meaningful research endeavour, in order for it to be meaningful, has to adopt as its frame an appropriate philosophical perspective. Hence, the relationship between philosophy and social research has to be appropriately grasped by a novice in academic research.

Fundamental Philosophical Principles of Research

There is invariably a philosophical perspective in whatever we do seriously in research- right from finding and formulating our research problem to forming and adopting appropriate research methodology. "Research issues will be informed by moral and ontological considerations about the social world, whereas the methods chosen will contain epistemological assumptions about the operationalization of the research question and the best means for obtaining the knowledge required" (Williams 136). Thus, the two basic parts of our research, its theme and its method are in fact always partaking of two very fundamental principles of philosophy: Ontology and Epistemology.

Michael Crotty, in his insightful work, *The Foundations of Social Research* (1998) clarifies this interface between research and philosophy with significant clarity. He clarifies that the choice of our research issue, justification of our choice and the particular use of our methodology will bring forth our basic assumptions about the reality of our world that we hold on to. Our research ultimately attests to our understanding of reality and our appreciation of the capacity of human knowledge of that reality.

Hence, Crotty puts forth four basic elements of any research process:

1. **Methods:** the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyse data related to some research question or hypothesis.
2. **Methodology:** the strategy, plan of action, process, or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods to procure the desired outcome.
3. **Theoretical Perspective:** the philosophical stance informing the methodology and thus providing a context for the process and grounding its logic.

4. Epistemology: the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective, and thereby in the methodology.

(Crotty 11)

In order to fully grasp the interconnections between research and philosophy, let us consider three basic and related principles in the philosophy of research: ontology, epistemology and axiology.

ONTOLOGY

Ontology in philosophy is that branch of study which deals with the question of being. As Crotty observes, it is concerned with 'what is', with the nature of reality, and with the structure of its existence (Crotty 18).

A more nuanced understanding of ontology can be gleaned from Stanford Encyclopedia:

Ontology is usually also taken to encompass problems about the most general features and relations of the entities which do exist. There are also a number of classic philosophical problems that are problems in ontology understood this way. For example, the problem of how a universal relates to a particular that has it (assuming there are universals and particulars), or the problem of how an event like John eating a cookie relates to the particulars John and the cookie, and the relation of eating, assuming there are events, particulars and relations. These kinds of problems quickly turn into metaphysics more generally, which is the philosophical discipline that encompasses ontology as one of its parts.

One of the troubles with ontology is that it not only isn't clear what there is, it also isn't so clear how to settle questions about what there is, at least not for the kinds of things that have traditionally been of special interest to philosophers: numbers, properties, God, etc. Ontology is thus a philosophical discipline that encompasses besides the study of what there is and the study of the general features of what there is also the study of what is involved in settling questions about what there is in general, especially for the philosophically tricky cases. How we can find out what there is isn't an easy question to answer. It might seem simple enough for regular objects that we can perceive with our eyes, like my house keys, but how should we decide it for such things as, say, numbers or properties? One first step to making progress on this question is to see if what we believe already rationally settles this question. That is to say, given that we have certain beliefs, do these beliefs already bring with them a rational commitment to an answer to such questions as 'Are there numbers?' If our beliefs bring with them a rational commitment to an answer to an ontological question about the existence of certain entities then we can say that we are committed to the existence of these entities. What precisely is required for such a commitment to occur is subject to debate, a debate we will look at momentarily. To find out what one is committed to with a particular set of beliefs, or acceptance of a particular theory of the world, is part of the larger discipline of ontology.

In research, one cannot play down the significance of its ontological basis. Importance of the ontological dimension of research has been highlighted by many. Blaikie is of the view that eventhough the root definition of ontology is as 'the study or science of being', in the context of research, ontology would rather mean 'the claims or assumptions that a particular approach to social enquiry makes about the nature of social reality' (as quoted by Crotty, 19).

As far as research is concerned, ontology becomes as a principle of direction for its process when we try to look into the very basis of our understanding of the chosen research issue. Ontology helps us face the questions: What is the meaning of the issue? How is it what it appears to be? How do we position it in relation

to the larger field to which it belongs? By methodologically moving step by step into finding valid answers to these ontological questions, our research finds its own meaning of being.

EPISTEMOLOGY

In research, as it is in philosophy generally speaking, questions of ontology are almost always intricately connected with questions of epistemology.

Epistemology is the study or science of knowledge. It involves knowledge, and embodies a certain understanding of what is entailed in knowing, in other words, *how we know what we know* (Crotty 16).

The term “epistemology” comes from the Greek words “episteme” and “logos”. “Episteme” can be translated as “knowledge” or “understanding” or “acquaintance”, while “logos” can be translated as “account” or “argument” or “reason”. Just as each of these different translations captures some facet of the meaning of these Greek terms, so too does each translation capture a different facet of epistemology itself. Although the term “epistemology” is no more than a couple of centuries old, the field of epistemology is at least as old as any in philosophy. In different parts of its extensive history, different facets of epistemology have attracted attention. Plato’s epistemology was an attempt to understand what it was to know, and how knowledge (unlike mere true opinion) is good for the knower. Locke’s epistemology was an attempt to understand the operations of human understanding, Kant’s epistemology was an attempt to understand the conditions of the possibility of human understanding, and Russell’s epistemology was an attempt to understand how modern science could be justified by appeal to sensory experience. Much recent work in formal epistemology is an attempt to understand how our degrees of confidence are rationally constrained by our evidence (‘Epistemology’, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

The relevance of epistemology in research is almost taken for granted. It is more than obvious in every stage of research, but at the same time, it is hardly given the attention it deserves in the different steps of a research. In the context of research, “epistemology is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate” (Maynard, as quoted by Crotty, 17).

Hence, epistemology provides research with the framework for working out its findings in the shape of knowledge. It also provides it with its method. For instance, epistemology, broadly speaking can provide you with the frame of objectivism, if your research is oriented to look into reality as neutrally existing, independent of our thinking of it. Alternatively, epistemology may offer the frame of constructivism if your research is of the view of reality as being formed by our engagement with it.

Hence, research is right from its beginning to its end a constant engagement with epistemology as its guiding philosophical principle.

AXIOLOGY

Apart from ontology and epistemology, research is to be guided in every step by a third, equally important philosophical principle: axiology.

Axiology, in elementary sense, is the study or science of values. As a field of philosophical enquiry as well as a theory of philosophy, it is intimately connected with ethics and aesthetics.

In the field of research, axiology provides direction for the knowledge that is being shaped and formulated by the research process with the help of ontology and epistemology.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy explains the import of axiology or the ‘theory of value’ in clear terms:

The term “value theory” is used in at least three different ways in philosophy. In its broadest sense, “value theory” is a catch-all label used to encompass all branches of moral philosophy, social and political philosophy, aesthetics, and sometimes feminist philosophy and the philosophy of religion — whatever areas of philosophy are deemed to encompass some “evaluative” aspect. In its narrowest sense, “value theory” is used for a relatively narrow area of normative ethical theory particularly, but not exclusively, of concern to consequentialists. In this narrow sense, “value theory” is roughly synonymous with “axiology”. Axiology can be thought of as primarily concerned with classifying what things are good, and how good they are. For instance, a traditional question of axiology concerns whether the objects of value are subjective psychological states, or objective states of the world.

But in a more useful sense, “value theory” designates the area of moral philosophy that is concerned with theoretical questions about value and goodness of all varieties — the theory of value. The theory of value, so construed, encompasses axiology, but also includes many other questions about the nature of value and its relation to other moral categories.

When the issues and imperatives of ethics and morality engage with the process of research, axiology becomes a guiding principle. It helps us sift questions of morality from questions of value as far as our research is concerned, which is integral for maintaining academic freedom and freedom of thinking independently and formulating our arguments cognitively in our drive towards the sense of reality that we wish to express through our findings. Thus, in such a view, it becomes clear that all these three fundamental principles- ontology, epistemology and axiology are inseparable threads that create the core of any meaningful research.

CONCLUSION

The three fundamental philosophical principles as we have seen together inform the meaning and method of any research, as well as provide its ultimate goal, which is the progress of human knowledge and action. As Jurate Morkuniene remarks, the function of contemporary social philosophy is to formulate the principles that later could serve as the criteria for the evaluation of social progress (7).

Academic research, when grounded on the sure footing of an ontology and epistemology that validate our faith in the progress of our knowledge, is bound to be the future of human cognitive life. “The principles of contemporary social philosophy can play a methodological role not only as a cognitive tool marking further ways of studying the conditions and premises of humane society, not only as the criteria revealing the level of humaneness of the material and spiritual phenomena in the society, but also as the basis of programs of action” (Morkuniene 8). This is where every good research ought to point to: a newer, better program of human action for the social progress of our collective world.

Reference:

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