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Ontology

Cross-references: discourse; epistemology; ethics; hermeneutics; methodology; paradigms; poststructuralist, power.

Introduction: What is ontology and why does it matter for organisation studies?

The word 'ontology' refers to the study of being. It is derived from the Greek words 'onto' (being) and 'logos' (science, discourse). This literal definition is, however, too wide to be of use to substantive enquiries. Indeed, philosophers realised over two thousand years ago that 'being' is at once the most universal and the emptiest of concepts. Everything one can think of can also be said to 'be' something in some way, be they material objects, animals, people, feelings, ideas, activities, social roles or mathematical objects. All of these have in common that they are; they have some, or participate in, being. Moreover, it is difficult, many would argue impossible, to think of an entity[i] that has no being whatsoever. Even atheists recognise that God is real as an *idea* and absences can be argued to be real. Think, for instance, of the effects that the absence of water or air have for fellow human beings. Even absurd or inexistent entities such as four-sided triangles and unicorns can be said to be real qua absurdities or fictional objects.

In the 20th Century, however, philosophers have proposed more restrictive definitions of ontology, often leading to fruitful developments in philosophy. Thus, while all the examples cited above can be said to *be*, their modes of being are arguably distinguishable. Stars, ducks, people, fear, liberty, writing, lecturers, triangles, draughts and unicorns can usefully be differentiated from one another and it can be said of them that 'they are different kinds of things'. Moreover, the (discursive) operations through which these objects are distinguished are also worthy of attention, especially for those (epistemologically relativist) commentators who argue that the categories we use to make sense of the world are artificial social constructs that are formulated in the context of social relations of power. It is also interesting to ask: through what processes, and through what power relations, are we allowed – and even obliged – to recognise, and sometimes create, differences between entities?

Discussions on ontology among philosophers[ii] led in turn to novel ways of approaching the human and social sciences, including organisational studies. As we shall argue below, ontological clarification is not a sterile academic exercise as it has profound implications on how researchers approach the phenomena they purport to study. Ontology also tends to

structure which research questions are worth asking; which methods of investigation can be trusted; and what the practical implications of the activity of researchers are likely to be.

The present entry on ontology has no pretension to exhaustivity or even sophistication. Its principle purpose is rather to introduce some of the philosophical approaches that have been particularly influential on the study of organisations, and to take stock of their influence. The first section introduces some of the philosophical contributions that have influenced ontological thinking in organisation studies. Particular attention is drawn on how each contribution differs from the positivist vision of the world which still permeates much of sociology and most of management and organisation studies. The second section examines how the debates identified in the field of philosophy are reflected and extended in the field of organisation studies. It studies the usage, usefulness and inherent limitations of ontological thinking for organisation studies. The concluding section examines a few possible developments for ontology in organisation studies which hint at promising avenues opened by ontological reflection.

Section I: Key philosophical contributions

The systematic questioning of being's differentiation, im/permanence, in/coherence and in/finitude can be traced, in the West, back to pre-Socratic philosophy over 2,400 years ago. The term 'ontology' presents us with a fundamental ambiguity as it refers both to the study of the nature of reality and to the study of an author's or a community's specific conception of reality. This ambiguity has led to a distinction within the literature, to which we refer throughout this piece, between *committed ontology* (aka. philosophic ontology) and *uncommitted ontology* (aka. scientific ontology). Committed ontology seeks to articulate a general conception of ontology in which to anchor current or future theoretical and empirical research programs. Uncommitted ontology focuses instead on the elucidation of the ontological presuppositions or assumptions of a particular author, theory or community. While committed ontology is concerned with the existence of those entities it discerns, uncommitted ontology remains agnostic about their existence.

Rather than attempting an exhaustive summary of ontological writings over the past couple of millennia, we begin by detailing the positivist ontology which has historically dominated natural and social science, and subsequently attend to a number of alternative philosophical positions which still inform contemporary approaches to organisation studies.

I.1. Positivism's implicit ontology

In the philosophy of the social sciences, the expression 'positivism' is associated with Auguste Comte whose vision of nature, knowledge and history was informed by two principle ideas. Firstly, that the human mind is destined to progress and improve through successive historical stages. Secondly, that the process of scientific development is linear, from mathematics, to astronomy, to physics, to chemistry, to biology and, finally, to the social sciences. In this chronological, systematic and hierarchical organisation, the social sciences occupy a place characterised both by their greater complexity and by their meta-theoretical continuity with the natural sciences. One same ontology is assumed to hold for the natural and for the social sciences alike. Moreover, this ontology is not theorised as one plausible construct among others. Rather, positivism (in the Comtean guise) assumes that alternative ontologies are the mark of, at best, unscientific thinking and, at worst, culturally retarded visions of the world.

What are the ontological features characteristic of, or implicit in, positivism? Firstly, positivism assumes that reality is made of physical things that are discrete and additive. Think, for

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instance, of Newtonian physics in which the gravitational force exerted by/on a group of objects can be strictly decomposed in terms of the force exerted by/on each of the objects. Secondly, for positivism's ontology, the emergence of novel properties in virtue of the interrelation of elements is bound to either remain a mystery or be explained in terms of interactions (rather than internal relations) between discrete elements. One noteworthy consequence of the ontological principles of discreteness and additivity is that the identity of any entity is independent of the relations in which it stands. For positivism, an object does not become something else in virtue of being related to another object. Thirdly, the objects of positivism are assumed to exist independently of people's perception. The proverbial Newtonian apple is subject to the same laws independently of how people look at it. Fourthly, being is characterised by permanence rather than by impermanence, and stillness is assumed to be primary to movement. The proverbial apple may fall from the tree, but this fall must itself be explained by an assumedly external factor such as the breaking of a branch. Moreover, a satisfactory explanation/description of the fall must invoke a universal and eternal law that applies to all physical bodies alike. This leads us to our fifth characterisation of positivism's ontology: entities are assumed to be governed by universal laws that are expressed in terms of event regularities. For instance: 'whenever an apple falls at t_0, its velocity in t_1 is $g.(t_1-t_0)$'.

The five ontological characteristics of positivism above imply that proper science is about uncovering event regularities through observation and verification or, in the case of Popperianism, through observation, hypothesis formation and falsification. Proper knowledge of the world is best expressed through strict, unambiguous, definitions that allow for mathematical computation and prediction. Whether positivism's ontology is best qualified as committed or uncommitted ontology depends on the author. While Comte was certainly committed to the truth of positivism's ontological presuppositions, others such as Quine were arguably agnostic about them.

I.2. Interpretation and the specificity of the human sciences
An alternative approach to knowledge, however, developed in parallel to the positivist approach to the human and social sciences. This broad approach, commonly termed interpretivist or hermeneutic, can be traced from Schleiermacher in the early 19th Century to Dilthey and Weber in the early 20th Century to Heidegger and Gadamer in the mid-20th Century. At root in this hermeneutic tradition is the idea that the social and human world is *meaningful*. Yet, the meaning of what people say and of what they do is not immediately accessible to an external observer and requires an effort of interpretation. What is the ontological import of hermeneutics for the human and social sciences?

The first implication is that positivism is fundamentally insufficient for a systematic study of people and societies. Practices of external observation, discovery of general laws and prediction-making must be complemented or even replaced by interpretations of what people say and do. While the necessity of interpretation is primarily an epistemological implication, it also bears significant ontological implications. Indeed, it implies that the world is also made of meanings, of values (moral or aesthetic), of emotions and of representations that escape the positivist apprehension. How does the subjection of the social sciences to a hermeneutic moment destabilise the ontological features that we attributed above to positivism? Firstly, the world comprises not only discrete and additive physical things but also symbols and human artefacts (think of works of art) that can't be reduced to their physical thingness without losing their characteristic nature. Indeed, something significant is lost whenever a painting is treated

as just a big rectangular chunk of wood and cloth covered with oil and various chemical components.

Secondly, the texts, practices and institutions produced by people possess a meaning that is usually irreducible to their constitutive elements. An example is provided by Weber's reflection on the two meanings of 'understanding' as observational meaning (*aktuelles Verstehen*) as opposed to explanatory understanding (*erklarendes Verstehen*). The action of a wo/man cutting a tree can be interpreted (observational understanding) as 'cutting a tree' by simply looking at the immediate context of the action. However, an explanatory understanding of the wo/man's action as building a house for herself (as opposed to working for a wage or engaging in a recreational activity) must articulate the specific act of chopping into a wider practice (eg. housebuilding; wage-earning; leisure, etc.).

Thirdly, positivism's assumption that the objects to which it refers exist independently of people's perception is either defeated or problematized. It is defeated if the expression 'people's perceptions' is understood to mean 'some person's perceptions'. Indeed, interpreting a person's actions supposes that said person's perceptions bear significantly on the actions s/he performs. A more sophisticated defence of the perception-independency characteristic would interpret 'people's perceptions' in terms of the observer's perceptions at the time of observing. But even if we maintain that 'the meanings held by participants exist independently of the meanings held by social scientists at any given time', we do not escape a necessary problematisation of the researcher/researched relationship. Firstly, because research happens in the context of a relation between researcher and researched Secondly, as Gadamer would argue, the researcher brings her own prejudices to research. These prejudices are not biases that could be removed through refined analysis but are, rather, constitutive conditions of the research activity[iii]. For instance, praiseworthy research on gender inequalities presupposes an assumption by the researcher that there is a distinction between men and women and that this distinction is potentially relevant for understanding inequalities and inequities.

More could be said, however, about the ontological problems prompted by the relation between researcher and researched. In particular, the implied division of the world into 'subjects' and 'objects' of enquiry indicates that positivism and hermeneutics suffer from the ambiguous ontological status of wo/man as both the (transcendental) subject of knowledge and as the empirical object of study. Positivism either denies subjectivity or attributes subjectivity of a certain kind exclusively to the researcher. Either way, it denies the researched's subjectivity. Interpretivism is more subtle as it recognises the subjectivity of both researcher and researched. Yet, two ontological problems arise. The first issue is addressed by Giddens's discussion of social science's 'double hermeneutics'. In Giddens's view, natural scientists perform a simple hermeneutics[iv] on natural objects that hold no reflexive powers. The situation is different, however, in the social sciences whose objects of enquiry are also subjects. The latter are therefore capable of acquiring and employing those very concepts and ways of looking used by social researchers. Thus, they perform a 'double hermeneutic' consisting in re-interpreting the researcher's initial interpretations. The unfortunate consequence, for those attached to a detached (i.e. positivist) conception of knowledge, is that those theories used to describe and explain the practices of agents are in turn (and we may add *in time*) adopted by agents for their subsequent practices.

It may be argued, however, that interpretivism can adapt to the problems raised by the double hermeneutics by recognising the temporality separating the researcher's initial interpretation from the subsequent interpretations performed by the researched. Interpretivism stumbles, however, on the ontological question of whether the researcher's initial interpretation can be

said to be causally effective on the researched. This leads us to the second ontological problem arising from wo/man's ambiguous status as both object and subject: does the category of causality apply to thoughts and knowledge?

Indeed, both positivism and interpretivism assume a Humean conception of causality as event regularities, which creates a dilemma. On one hand, if Humean causality applies to thoughts, then each of our own thoughts would have already been determined by some separate anterior event. Wo/man's freedom and creativity is thus negated. On the other hand, if thoughts occur in a realm independent of causality, a number of difficulties arise. For instance, it becomes difficult to explain how a person's thoughts can influence, and be influenced, by other people's thoughts or by the material relations in which they engage[v].

In the remainder of this section, we examine three philosophical traditions, Heideggerian ontology, post-structuralism and critical realism, that have sought in different ways to dis/solve the problems raised by the dual ontological status of wo/man as both object and subject of knowledge.

I.3. Heidegger's return to committed ontology
Heidegger's ontological project is based on a radical redefinition of ontology (Heidegger 2005/1927). This project is still viewed by many as the most important contribution to 20th Century continental philosophy (see Critchley 2001; Wheeler 2013). Its central claim is that the problems of metaphysics (including the divided conception of wo/man as both object and subject inherited from Kant) are traceable to philosophy's inability to reflect on the meaning of the verb 'to be'. Thus, before asking 'what are the different kinds of things that can be said to exist?' Heidegger asks the primordial question: 'what does *being* mean?'

By reorienting ontological questioning around the question of the meaning of being, Heidegger opens up a number of new philosophical questions: is being (as a verb) uniform or are there different modes of being? Is our finite *existence* any different from the *presence* of those things that surround us? What are the existential conditions of possibility of being's authentic disclosure as existence rather than as mere presence? And how does a renewed, presumably more authentic, understanding of being allow us to criticise aspects of the epoch in which we live?

While Heidegger's thought is too subtle and complex to be captured satisfactorily in a few lines, we can, however, provide cursory answers to the questions raised above by Heidegger and indicate how his ontology differs from positivism's. Heidegger's prose is replete with neologisms and juxtaposes remarks on everyday life with erudite commentary of past philosophers; but most notably, it avoids the expressions 'man' and 'subject' which were central and constitutive of post-Cartesian philosophy. Heidegger refers instead to 'those entities which are ourselves' through the expression *Dasein*, which literally means 'being there' or 'being here'. This conceptual shift is performed as an attempt to escape from the objectivist limitations of anthropology, psychology and biology (*Being and Time*, pp. 45-50). Contrary to positivism, Heidegger proposes that being can take a variety of modalities and that these can be understood pre-scientifically (ie. more authentically) by attending to our relationship with our familiar environment. Many of the entities that populate our familiar world are related to as *equipment*. Dasein finds them *ready-to-hand* and can use them without having to think too much about them. Think for instance of a skilled carpenter manipulating a hammer. In a now-famous paradox, Heidegger proposes that the presence of ready-to-hand entities is revealed precisely when they are damaged or missing! A damaged hammer reveals itself simultaneously as partly ready-to-hand and partly present-at-hand. Our carpenter can still use it but she now

has to think about it when using it in her familiar activities. The case of the missing hammer is even more telling as the carpenter's concern reveals fully the previously opaque present-at-hand nature of the hammer. As Heidegger has it 'when something ready-to-hand is found missing, though its everyday presence [Zugegensein] has been so obvious that we have never taken any notice of it, this makes a *break* in those referential contexts which circumspection discovers. Our circumspection comes up against emptiness, and now sees for the first time *what* the missing article was ready-to-hand *with* and *what* it was ready to hand *for*.'

The above passage hints at a conception of the world as constituted by the totality of 'referential contexts' of those entities ready-to-hand. Thus, the world is not known through the positive knowledge of independent things in themselves but rather through our circumspection which discloses the totality of involvements through which we relate to ready-to-hand entities. Two characteristics of Dasein follow. Firstly, Dasein is characterised by its fundamental openness as it is continuously interpreting the world in terms of possibilities. Secondly, not all possibilities are simultaneously disclosed to Dasein. Heidegger refers to the region of Being in which things are revealed as mattering in a certain way (rather than another) by introducing the notion of *clearing*. Dasein's *mood* and its historical *heritage* (what most social theorists would call its social context) determine which modes of being are more readily disclosed and which tend to remain concealed. In Heidegger's terminology, mood and heritage determine the clearing that is accessible to Dasein.

How does Heidegger's philosophy allow a critique of positivism's ontological presuppositions? Firstly, Heidegger argues that the mathematisation of science is a symptom rather than a cause of the technological mode of revealing. It is because scientists, like most of their contemporaries (though unlike traditional artisans or romantic poets) are so immersed into the technological mode of being that they are fascinated by mathematical formalisation. Secondly, Heidegger can say of science's mode of disclosure that it demands that 'nature be orderable as standing-reserve' by requiring that 'nature report itself in some way or other that is identifiable through calculation and that it remains orderable as a system of information' (*Question Concerning Technology,* 328). It is characteristic of technology's mode of disclosure that it 'drives out every possibility of revealing' and thus *enframes* and *conceals* the essentially dynamic unfolding of being. Technological (ie. objectivist and positivist) thinking involves the view that reality is only susceptible to a single mode of disclosure, thus blinding Dasein to the fundamental structure of being in which any particular clearing is ontologically co-present with an unintelligible plenitude of alternative clearings.

In sum, our (social and cultural) heritage conditions the modes of being that may be disclosed to us or that tend to remain mysteriously concealed; and positivism secretes an ontology that is at once particularly reifying and totalising. It reduces ontological openness to ontic closure and it totalises its worldview by concealing the concealments that it operates. Heidegger's ontology discerns the possibility of a dereified conception of being but nonetheless stumbles to describe it accurately in philosophy's systematic language where, he admits, poets and mystics can venture an extra step.

I.4. Post-foundational perspectives: historical & negative ontologies
Heidegger's ontological critique of positivist thinking had a resounding impact on social theory. In particular, it influenced a broad tradition of critical social theory which we refer to as 'post-foundational perspectives'. This label includes such thinkers as Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida and Lacan and, more recently, Agamben, Butler, Laclau and Zizek. It could very broadly be characterised by a general distrust of grand-narratives such as Comte's positivist triumphalism (cf. supra) but also historically deterministic interpretations of Hegel or Marx.

More specifically, this tradition is united by its scepticism towards the assumption of objectivist forms of knowledge that would i) presume the existence of epistemological and ontological foundations that are universal or even trans-historical; ii) ignore the historical conditions of possibility of the constitution of knowledge, including basic ontologies; and iii) ignore the political effects of knowledge. For simplicity's sake, we restrict our exposition to the works of Foucault and Laclau. However, many of our arguments remain valid (with occasional tweaks) for the other thinkers cited above. Our discussion of Foucault and Laclau is further channelled by our attentiveness to how they engage, directly or indirectly, with positivism's ontological presuppositions.

I.4.a. Foucault's historical and critical ontologies of ourselves

Foucault's project of a critical ontology calls for an ongoing critique (ie. an interrogation of the limits and conditions of possibility) of what we are capable of saying, thinking, and doing. Foucault does this by interrogating, through detailed historical studies, the various ways in which we have problematised the practices in which we engage presently (Foucault 1977, 2005/1966). This intellectual project has an ethical and practical purpose as it seeks to distinguish possible, and desirable, transgressions to the arbitrary limits constitutive of *how we constitute ourselves as subjects* of knowledge, of power relations and of ethical practices.

What makes this project of an ontology of ourselves *historical*? Firstly, Foucault's studies are more historically specific than those of Kant who studied the assumedly universal contours of the transcendental subject of (objective) knowledge, (moral) action and (founded) judgement. Rather than asking how objective knowledge is possible, Foucault asks under which conditions is a claim to knowledge considered as objective today and, more specifically, how the modern human sciences emerged. Instead of asking how political subjects should organise the polis, he asks under which conditions is an act deemed punishable today and, furthermore, how did our contemporary relations of power emerge from dubious objectifying human sciences and from a typically modern concern with conducting people's conduct? Note how, whereas Heidegger's ontological critique of our contemporary epoch stumbled in front of the mystery of presumably possible, though irredeemably enclosed, alternative modes of being (*cf. supra*), Foucault's project of a historical ontology interrogates the *historical* emergence of various horizons of being so as to inspire alternative ways of understanding, of interacting and of cultivating ourselves. In sum, Foucault's is a philosophical project of uncommitted ontology[vi] with ethical and political stakes.

I.4.b. Laclau's negative ontology

Laclau (Laclau & Mouffe 2001) extends Foucault's interrogation of the basic positivities (established and *apparently* unambiguous concepts) that constitute our knowledge, and of their effects on power relations. Both authors are sceptical towards naively realist conceptions of knowledge that assume a one to one correspondence between our representations and the reality they are meant to represent. Both also share the fundamental intuition that systems of knowledge are both a medium and an effect of social relations of power.

Laclau, however, clarifies and perhaps radicalises Foucault's approach in a number of ways. Firstly, whereas Foucault employed the expression 'discourse' in ways covering widely what is said and written, Laclau employs discourse more restrictively. For him, discourse is the basic system of differences through which categories become positive, knowledge becomes objective and statements become meaningful. Discourse, for Laclau, extends beyond

recognisably linguistic acts and encompasses non-linguistic practices, as long as the latter are meaningful.

Of key significance for Laclau's thought, discourse is fundamentally incomplete. The fixation of positive identities is ever precarious and contested. Firstly, because the identity of any object is inseperable from what it is not, and secondly, because what said object is not depends on the discourse in which its identity is inscribed. The resulting picture is that of a *negative ontology* in which social identities are only artificially fixated by an implicit reference to what they are not.

I.5. Reintroducing and deconstructing materiality

The status of materiality in post-foundational ontology has raised significant philosophical and sociological discussions. Deconstructing the common realist distinction between the material and the social, Barad, for example, has used quantum physics to argue that neither material nor human properties precede their interaction, the observation of which (by the researcher) is a 'cut' which temporarily instantiates the distinction between the two. Thus the material and the individual are assumed to not exist prior to their interaction, hence the focus on 'sociomaterial'.

In a similar vein, Latour's Actor Network Theory presupposes a relational, and anti-essentialist ontology that is proudly actualist, rejecting social structures in favour of empirical networks between actors, and arguing that the properties of any actor or entity cannot be ascribed prior to their engagement in an empirical network. Both material objects and actors, therefore, come into being, primarily through their observation in science. For both Barad and Latour, such an approach problematises not only traditional distinctions between ontology and epistemology, but in doing so, those traditionally made between observers (the individual or 'science'), the observed (materiality or 'society') and the apparatus by which observations are made (technology or experiments).

I.6. The critical realist committed ontology

Post-foundational thinking provides a powerful deterrent against unqualified metaphysical claims. Does this mean that ontological projects should be restricted to uncommitted ontology and that the prospects of a committed ontology were but an objectivist chimera of the 19th Century? In this last sub-section, we explore an influential – and in our view, promising – attempt proposed by the critical realist movement to argue otherwise. Bhaskar and other authors identifying with 'critical realism' (eg. Archer, Collier, Jessop, Lawson, Norrie, Reed, Sayer, see Archer et al. 2013) defend a humanist realism constitutive of a committed ontology. What are the ontological claims of critical realists and how are these claims justified?

CR's ontological arguments are structured according to a logics of abduction, that is, of inference to the most plausible hypothesis. Thus CR thinkers start from a description of a practice that both author and reader acknowledge as adequate. Then, they ask what the world must be like for the described practice to hold the characteristics author and reader have agreed on? This interrogation results in a number of competing claims that may further be discussed and refined.

Bhaskar (1979) develops transcendental realist arguments for the social sciences, broadly defined as the study of those entities that depend on human activity. His argument begins with everyday social practices. From these he infers that social ontology is necessarily 'relational' in the sense that all social entities are defined by and exist in virtue of their relations to other

entities. Think for instance of the role of 'teachers' who presuppose 'students' or 'parents' who presuppose 'children'. Another characteristic of everyday life is that it features agents who hold powers of intentionality and reflexivity. And indeed, we have good reasons to interact with people differently than we do with aubergines. A third characteristic of everyday life is that reasons (whether explicitly formulated or not) are also causes of human action, thus dissolving the hermeneutic dichotomy between reasons and causes. Note that this ontological claim can only be formulated if we replace the Humean conception of causality as event regularity with a realist (Aristotelian) conception of causality as the generation of a difference. Fourthly, individuals are not isolated atoms, but evolve within an institutional environment characterized by emergent social structures (systems of positions, relations and conventions) that are inherited from prior generations. Thus, CR defends a dualistic conception of structure and agency that presents similarities and sympathies with non-deterministic interpretations of Marx (see for instance Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts 2003). Fifthly, the temporal and processual nature of social life is recognized in this social ontology as each new generation of actors continuously adopts, rejects or transforms inherited structures from its predecessors. CR regards social activity as production, that is, as the transformation of pre-existing material causes (Al-Amoudi & Latsis 2014: 371; Bhaskar 1979: 34). Finally, CR ontology proposes a neat theorization of absence and need, thus recasting ethical concerns at the heart of sociological enquiry.

The resulting picture of Bhaskar's ontological investigations is one in which social identities are emergent from, though irreducible to, the interactions of humans, who have powers of memory, imagination, reflexivity. The latter are again dependent on, but irreducible to the interaction of a complexity of physiological, psychological and neurological structures, and so on. But emergence does not only occur 'down' – if we look 'up' from humans, we can see a number of emergent social entities which are dependent upon humans for their production and reproduction, but are not reducible to individuals. Thus, social structures, such as class, gender and organizations, are certainly dependent upon humans for their existence, but cannot be understood at the level of the individual, and have their own properties and (potential) powers, one of which is the ability to socialize humans that inhabit these social structures.

At this point, it might be possible to highlight how CR's ontology stands in diametrical opposition to that of positivism. Let us reconsider the five ontological features of positivism in reverse order. Firstly, reality is not only made of discrete or additive physical things but also encompasses entities that are not necessarily concrete, discrete or additive. Real entities include, for instance, ideas, relations, mechanisms, powers. Secondly, CR holds that relations are real and that the activities of complex emergent entities can't be explained solely in terms of the activities of simpler entities that compose them. Emergence is not a mere epistemological artefact but is, rather, a central ontological category. Thirdly, while CR recognises that the objects of natural science can and should be assumed to exist independently of our perception, this concept-independence does not hold in the case of the social and human sciences whose objects may temporarily exist independently of the researcher's perception but never independently of anyone's perception. Fourthly, while impermanence and stillness are deeply problematic for positivism, CR assumes that entities are continuously engaged in activity and that they are subject to continuously changing tendencies. Fifthly, CR does not assume that entities are governed by universal laws expressed by event regularities. Entities are assumed, instead, to be subject to powers and tendencies that may or may not be actualised depending on their specific context. Scientific knowledge does not consist in being able to make accurate predictions as much as it consists in being able to provide explanations that are plausible, coherent and helpful.

Section II: Ontology in organisation studies

It should be stated clearly that *ontological studies offer no substitute for substantive enquiries of organising and organisation*. Thus, scholars interested in ontology and the social sciences sometimes find it useful to establish some distinction between, on the one hand, ontological discussions aiming at disambiguating basic concepts and entities so as to facilitate future substantive research and, on the other, substantive enquiries aiming at studying specific organisational configurations, usually with the help of previous ontological ground clearing. The distinctiveness, and insufficiency, of ontology is recognised both by critical realist and by post-foundational scholars alike. Thus, in the critical realist tradition, Fleetwood and Ackroyd (2004) distinguish between (i) meta-theoretical studies which address questions of ontology, epistemology and ethics; (ii) methodological studies which develop methods of analysis compatible with a given ontological framework; and (iii) substantive studies that study specific institutions or organisations. The difference between meta-theory and substantive enquiry is mirrored, in the post-foundational tradition, by Ezzamel and Willmott (2014: 1015-6) who discern 'two paths of theory development'. While the first path corresponds roughly to what we are designating here as substantive enquiry, the second corresponds to (a post-positivist variant of) meta-theory.

We understand that most researchers in organisation studies are more interested in substantive studies than in ontology *per se*. Yet, while it can be argued that ontology is *vacuous* in the absence of substantive enquiry, it is equally the case that substantive enquiry is *blind* in the absence of ontological reflection. Moreover, while ontology is conventionally presented as logically and chronologically anterior to substantive enquiry, the relationship between both practices is iterative rather than linear. On one hand, ontological reflection develops by interrogating factual premises (Descartes's cogito; Heidegger's missing hammer; Foucault's late appearance of 'sexuality'; Bhaskar's possibility of experiments). On the other, philosophy is never applied; it is always interpreted. Thus, it is not a matter of getting the ontology 'right' before getting the substantive enquiry 'right'. There is, instead, an ongoing iteration between ontological reflexion based on the finding of previous substantive enquiries and refined substantive enquiries informed by renewed ontological reflection.

In defining what exists, what can exist, and the relationality of what exists, ontology acts as an 'underlabourer' for understanding not only what organisations are, how they come into being and how they are related to other entities, but also, for those for whom ontology contains a critical or ethical aspect, what they should be. The potential of any study's theorising and methodology is, therefore, enabled and constrained by its implied or espoused ontology, as the principles of what exists determine what theories can realistically achieve. Yet, there is no one-to-one match between ontologies and approaches to organisational theorising: as we see below, different perspectives on organisations can hold radically different descriptive, predictive and prescriptive orientations but still share an ontological underpinning.

II.1. Positivist approaches to organisation studies

Burrell and Morgan's *Sociological Paradigms and Organisational Analysis* provided, as early as 1979, an early attempt to break-out of the hegemony[vii] of positivist assumptions in organisation studies. Their purpose was to identify internally consistent alternatives to the dominant positivist and regulationist paradigm (think Talcott Parsons) in organisation studies. Yet, thirty five years on, positivism still holds the dominant position in studies of management and organisations and, especially in the organisational psychology literature. Within positivist

approaches, it may be possible to distinguish between those that treat individuals as their basic unit of analysis and those that focus instead on organisational features.

Individualistic approaches. This form of theorising frequently assumes that the quantification of empirical events, combined with correlation analyses, uncovers generalisable laws that can predict future events. For such approaches, organisations are closed systems, similar to laboratories, in which policy decisions concerning, say, piece-rate systems, will effect predictable outcomes, such as increased output per worker, and thus provide a clear prescription for management. Historically, although the relations between positivism and organisation emerged with industrialisation and the scientific management approach of Taylor, Fayol and others, it has proved remarkably resilient, emerging in different guises in human relations and bureaucratic forms of organising. Today, whilst the proliferation of 'enterprise' IT systems and 'big data' offers researchers and managers fertile ground for positivist research, there are scant indications that these approaches are likely to be perturbed by the philosophical interrogation of their ontological assumptions. With its one-dimensional approach to conceptualising the agent, positivist individualism also underpins many 'rationalist' approaches to organisations, such as transaction cost economics, agency theory, population ecology, and institutional economics. These approaches borrow the anti-relational and atomistic assumptions that positivism makes of objects (*cf. section I.1*) and apply it to the individual, not only denying the part sociality and subjectivity play in organisational life, but also undermining attempts to study the latter by exploring people's identities, relations, and groupings.

Structural-functionalist accounts. Yet, positivist rationality is not confined to accounts of individuals. It is also combined with, and developed by, an acceptance of social structures in structural-functionalist accounts of organisations. Thus the functionalist accounts of organisations promoted by say Mayo and Parsons emphasise not only the role of organisations as part of systems of society, but also the role of these social structures in reproducing the forms of rationality that allowed systemic or organisational efficiency. Thus, for organisation theorists this invited explorations of how best to structure companies, by arranging labour, standardising tasks and implementing technology to maximise productivity and efficiency. Again, such approaches have hardly fallen out of fashion and still provide the mainstay of many management consulting products and services that currently shape organisational practice.

The dominance of positivism in corporations, business schools and publishing however, is not complete and there are a few notable and promising exceptions, to which we now turn.

II.2. Orthodox Marxist approaches
The ontological acceptance of social structures does not mandate a prescription or description of functionalist harmony. A dissenting voice is provided by Marxist thought which, whilst realist and structuralist, is, in its theory and ethical implications, distinct from functional modes of thought which prioritise stability and cohesion. The implied ontology of Marx's work, whilst still very much under debate, focuses on material dialectics which takes the mode of production as the engine for structural conflict and change. This focus provided organisational theorists, such as Braverman, with a framework to retrace the effects of wider social (class) conflict on capitalist organisations. The subsequent rise of the Labour Process school used Marxist thinking to underpin a diverse flourishing of studies of unions, resistance and workplace conflict which only lost its dominant critical position with the rise of avowedly anti-leftist governments (and the subsequent demise of leftist academic funding policies) in the 1980s. Whilst it would be stretching the truth to posit Marxist organisational analysis as a dominant strand in extant critical organisational analysis, it has recently gained a resurgence as critical

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realist authors (many ex-Marxists themselves) have argued not only that Marx was a proto-critical realist, but that critical realism develops, and can be developed by, a coupling with Marxism (see Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts 2008).

II.3. Critical realism

Although there exist non-deterministic interpretations of Marxist thought that display an implicit ontology very close to critical realism's, the former has declined in popularity in organisation studies whilst the latter has grown. Whilst early sociological interest in critical realism focused on those areas traditionally associated with Marxist organisation studies (e.g. trade unions; power and resistance) the prolific output of Margaret Archer on questions of agency and reflexivity has prompted a diversification of studies of society, people and organisation inspired by critical realism. Indeed, much of critical realism's progress in organisation studies has come from attempts to provide clear and coherent ontological foundations for topics that have traditionally been addressed by ontologically uncommitted post-foundational writers.

In recent years there has been a significant growth in management and organisation studies using critical realism to provide alternatives to the 'flat' approaches of social constructionism and practice ontologies. The result has been a reintroduction of both structure and agency to discussions of discourse (Fairclough 2013), identity (Marks & O'Mahoney 2014), and information technology (Mutch 2013), as well as the more traditional concerns of economics (Fleetwood 1999), Marxism (Adler 2011) and class (Sayer 2005) – although the latter *tend* to be much more prevalent in sociological journals that those of organization studies. This diversification of critical realism is reflected in a recent edited collection by Edwards et al. (2014) which considers the consequences of relying on critical realism in a variety of methodological positions as varied as grounded theory, ethnography and probability modelling, as well as more traditional approaches.

II.4. Post-foundational approaches

The philosophical contributions identified in section I.4 as 'post-foundational' provided a fertile theoretical ground for OS scholars who felt sceptical of the claims of positivism and functionalism to objective, apolitical, knowledge. However, rather than seeking – as CR does – to correct the ontological flaws of positivism, these approaches are marked by their uncommitted stance to ontology. The latter is, in their view, most interesting when it helps unearthing and deconstructing the ontological, theoretical and ethical presuppositions of organisational participants. From these post-foundational perspectives, the practice of ontological questioning is driven less by an interest in metaphysical knowledge than by an interest in understanding the political implications of participants' ontological assumptions. In other words, participants' ontologies are of interest because of their performative and political effects on organisations.

Foucauldian approaches.

Foucault has been one of the most influential sources of ontological underlabouring in organisation studies and inspired a profusion of identity and discourse studies from the nineties onwards. Early studies (e.g. by David Knights, Peter Miller, and Barbara Townley) responded to changing organisational forms by emphasising both the constructive effects of the new management discourses found in HRM, Total Quality Management and Business Process Re-engineering, and the self-disciplinary effects of the 'electronic panopticon' that was enabled

by new technologies. In recent years scholars such as Thomas and Hardy (2011) have problematised and extended studies of organisational change by relying on Foucault's conception of power as a cluster of relations rather than as a substance possessed by some (privileged) agents.

Contemporary Foucauldian studies of interest also include critical interrogations of organisational truth-telling (Weiskopf 2011) and decision-making (Weiskopf and Willmott 2011). Central to these approaches is the idea that 'truth-telling' (*parhesia*) and ethics should be viewed as practices of questioning, rather than merely following, moral orders and moral rules-in-use. In general, the works cited above inherited from Foucault an uncommitted interest in ontology that is more concerned with the ethical and political possibilities opened by (constantly) interrogating organisational orders than with the (self-deceptive) quest for social reality's ultimate ontological foundations.

Negative ontology.

In recent years, the influence of Butler, Lacan, Laclau and Zizek has grown in organisation studies. As we pointed in section I.4 above, these authors share a scepticism towards narratives claiming universality and towards identities claiming unquestionable stability. Their ontology is marked by attentiveness both to hegemony (when discursive stability becomes all but unquestionable) and to negativity (at the root, they contend, of all forms of positivity).

Remarkable contributions to organisation studies include debates on the labour process with critical realist scholars. Thus, Contu and Willmott (2005) engaged with Reed's (2005) critical realist agenda. More recently, O'Doherty and Willmott (2009) provided a detailed illustration on how negative ontology can deepen the analysis of the labour process in creative industries. For instance, by attending to participants' (unpaid) efforts to preserve their precarious sense of identity or by tracing the dislocation of the workplace's traditional spatial and temporal boundaries into networks of workers-entrepreneurs in which participants commit 18+ hours of their lives every day. Other notable approaches inspired by Zizek and Lacan include Fleming and Sturdy's (2009) study of neo-normative control, that is, forms of control based on the ontologically absurd and politically self-defeating injunction to 'just be oneself'.

Actor Network Theory

A number of organisation studies theorists have drawn on Latour's (1987) Actor Network Theory to explain the settlement of controversies and the establishment of actor-networks composed of an ontologically undifferentiated arrangement of people, facts and machines. Key contributions include Bajde (2013) as well as substantive studies that combine ANT with other approaches such as historical ontology (Valentine 2007) or Science and Technology Studies (Quattrone and Hopper 2006). In a similar vein, researchers have espoused sociomaterial ontologies (e.g. from Haraway and Barad) which, like Latour, do not distinguish between the social and the material, to address the perceived neglect of the material in organisation studies, or at least as a counter to the ostensible determinism of materiality found in Marxism or traditional studies of technology.

Process perspectives.

Process ontologies have inspired studies of organisation that emphasise the temporal and 'becoming' aspects of organising. These, drawing on the work of Bergson and Whitehead propose that 'individuals and organizations are construed as temporarily stabilised event clusters abstracted from a sea of constant flux and change' (Nayak and Chia 2011: 281).

Process ontologies have influenced a number of organisational writers, including Weick's studies of social constructionism and Mary-Jo Hatch's work on organisational culture and Tsoukas and Chia's (2002) influential reflections on organisational change. McMurray (2010), for example, uses Chia's approach to better understand change in the NHS, whilst making an argument for its use of 'standard research methods for novel processual ends'; whilst Zhang et al. (2010) present the case for a process ontology underlying the leadership assumptions in Chinese Confucianism.

Postcolonial critiques of Western ontologies.

These approaches are broadly inspired by postcolonial studies initiated by Bhabha, Said and Spivak. One root argument is that academic institutions are 'workplaces engaged in the ideological production of neo-colonialism' (Spivak 1988: 210). Ontological discourse is no exception. The latter's claims to universality can be problematized, reversed and interrogated as indications of ontology's imperialistic tendencies.

Though relatively small and marginal, there exists a healthy and growing literature in organisation studies that problematizes and politicises the West's knowledge claims. This literature draws on diverse sources of inspiration fragmented across political studies, literature, geographic studies, history and anthropology. Notable contributions to management and organisation studies include Banerjee & Linstead (2004), Dar & Cooke (2008), Henry & Pene (2001) and Prasad (2003).

II.5. Philosophical though not ontological: ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism
Ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism have both been influential approaches in studies of society and organisation. The absence of explicit mentions of 'ontology' in works identified by their authors as contributions to ethnomethodology or symbolic interactionism (in organisation studies) is slightly surprising. Indeed, both approaches display a relatively high degree of reflexivity and (non-positivist) methodological awareness.

Two compatible and mutually reinforcing explanations may be ventured. Firstly, a historical/genealogical explanation would consider the intellectual ancestry of both approaches. Ethnomethodology is most commonly traced to Garfinkel and symbolic interactionism to Goffman. Both authors acknowledge the key influence of sociologist of everyday life Alfred Schutz while Garfinkel refers in his *Studies in Ethnomethodology* to philosophers Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Wittgenstein. It is our understanding that the latter were sceptical about ontology because of the Kantian critique of metaphysics on one hand and because of *Being and Time*'s cul-de-sac on the other.

A second, complementary, explanation would venture that both ethnomethodology and symbolic interactionism have diffused and developed (sometimes beyond recognition) precisely because they harboured a 'tool box' ethos that favoured numerous though loosely related guidelines and successful exemplars over systematic methodologies or ontological reflection. Whether this lack of ontological reflection is problematic is best left, in the context of the present entry, as an open question for future investigation.

Conclusion: debates and future developments
Our principle argument is that ontological theorising has the power to emancipate organisation studies from conventional restrictions relative to the research questions; the scope of analysis; the methods of study; the objects of study; the ethical injunctions and the doubts thus raised.

Our discussion of ontology in philosophy and in organisation studies is meant as an introduction or a refresher rather than an exhaustive exposition or, worse, a tool-kit. If anything, the idea that philosophical ideas may be 'applied' is fraught with dangers for researchers in organisation studies. Philosophy has to be carefully interpreted and can never be automatically translated. No methodological toolkit can ever dispense researchers from engaging in continuous philosophical reflection on the questions they ask, on the way they define their objects of analysis, on the practices in which they engage and on the occasional inconsistencies between theory and practice.

That ontology is always to be interpreted and never to be automatically translated brings implications. Firstly, it follows that debate in organisational theory should be understood as a sign of healthy growth rather than a symptom of pre-scientific instability. And indeed, the refinement and clarification of philosophical ideas usually takes the form of (oft lively) debate. Thus, we can witness debates in OS as to whether Foucault's implicit ontology is best interpreted as (critically) realist (Al-Amoudi 2007) or as Nietzschean (Bardon and Josserand 2011). Similarly, Actor Network Theory has also been the topic of multiple ontological debates. In particular, critical realist organisational theorists such as Mutch (2013) have criticised ANT's ontological flatness while arguing that without an acceptance of structure or agency as distinct from discourse, explanations tend towards the tautological. However, the critique of post-foundational theorising is not an exclusively realist warhorse: for example, Whittle and Spicer (2008) question, from a negative ontology perspective, whether ANT provides the resources for thoroughly critical research.

The second implication of the impossibility of translating ontology automatically into useful and rigorous research is that it is quite perilous to predict the future of ontological theorising in organisation studies. We nonetheless close this entry by sketching, very briefly, six developments in ontology which may bear significantly on the future of organisation studies. We do so while acknowledging that the specific formulation of these future developments and our interest in them are influenced by our identification with the critical realist programme and our sympathetic curiosity towards Foucauldian scholarship.

1. Encouraging multiple and novel methods of enquiry. In economics (Lawson 1997), ontological reflection on the nature of social reality attempted to break with the fetishistic treatment of quantitative data and mathematical modelling as signs of intellectual rigour. Rigour, it was instead argued, stems from the adequacy of the tool with the object of analysis. While the situation is not as dire in organisation studies as in economics, a glance at the table of contents of the leading North American journals indicates a dominance of quantitative, positivistic, studies (cf. supra). Perhaps ontological reflection could continue the project initiated in the 1970s by Burrell and Morgan of legitimising different approaches to studying organisations? In particular, while qualitative approaches are increasingly accepted, they are still subject to positivist ontological assumptions and related injunctions (ie. 'let the data speak') that are ill suited to studying such entities as: becoming, meaning, subjectivity or social relations (as opposed to frequencies or social transactions).

2. Asking and reflecting on 'what is?' questions. The ontological question par excellence, 'what is X?' could perhaps be fruitfully asked for the entities that populate the discourse of organisation studies. There exist already a number of works of ontology that interrogate the nature of basic social entities such as conventions (Al-Amoudi and Latsis 2014); rules (Al-Amoudi 2010); institutions (Lawson 2003); technology (Faulkner, Lawson and Runde 2010) and values (Sayer 2011). However, these works are still restricted to sociology, economics and

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social theory and have not, to our knowledge, been widely discussed and incorporated into research on organisational phenomena.

3. *Completing 'what is?' questions with 'how did?' and 'what does it do?' questions*. Our review of the literature has revealed the centrality of processuality and of inter-relationality in non-positivist approaches to ontology. These meta-theoretical ideas have concrete relevance for substantive research in organisations. Indeed, authors who recognise the processuality of being will want to ask the historical question: 'how did X come to being?' where X is a social entity of interest. For them, organisation studies should bear a fundamentally historical dimension exemplified by Roy Jacques's fine study of the birth of the employee (Jacques 1995).

Similarly, authors writing from an ontological stance that recognises the internal-relationality of social entities should be open and interested in interrogations of the conditions of possibility and the effects of those social entities they study. Foucauldian studies of power/knowledge are one example. More generally, attentiveness to the social construction of knowledge prompts interrogating the effects of the ontological categories employed by participants in organisations (see for instance Al-Amoudi & Willmott 2011).

4. *Ethical and political implications of post-positivist ontologies.* The break with positivist ontology and epistemology encourages forms of research that recognise and even vindicate their ethical or political dimension. Recent examples basing ethical interrogation on a negative ontology include Ezzamel and Willmott's (2014) interrogation of an ethical register of theory formation or Weiskopf & Willmott's (2013) re-assessment of the case of the Pentagon papers. Among critical realists, Collier (1999) and Sayer (2011) have built on Bhaskar's sophisticated ontological theorising to interrogate the nature of worth and its relation to the social sciences. While these developments mixing ethics, politics, social theory and organisation studies are promising, they are still marginal and embryonic in management studies.

5. *Enriching our craft as organisational theorists through critical discussions of the ontology of established authors.* Philosophy and ontology should not be seen as 'banks of knowledge' featuring methods, concepts and data to be used by scientists. Rather, familiarity with philosophy and social theory sharpens one's ability to do good research. Through continuous reading in philosophy, we develop an eye for complex systems of dependencies, unavowable conflicts of interests, mystifications of (power) relations and sado-masochistic identifications. The beneficial effects on our craft may include drawing links across the humanities and the social sciences or building more coherent arguments. Most importantly, it involves developing a sense of the societal, political and intellectual stakes inherent to those situations we study. Thus, we suggest that familiarity with philosophical and ontological work has the potential to emancipate our research from the narrow perspectives imposed by hegemonic actors (including management as a social group) on the rest of society.

6. *Keeping up with ongoing ontological debates within philosophy.* As a final remark: discussions on topics related to ontology are lively in the realm of philosophy and social theory. One can think, within the post-foundational tradition, of Agamben's discussion of the state of exception as the (negative) foundation of the modern state. And, within the realist tradition, one can start to imagine the import for organisation studies of the current discussions on emergence and status functions between the Berkley Social Ontology Group (founded by John Searle) and the Cambridge Social Ontology Group (founded by Tony Lawson). These ontological elaborations are in the making and it would be presumptuous to guess their points of stabilisation. It can reasonably be expected, however, that these discussions and others, yet

to follow, will continue to inspire, challenge, infuriate and exasperate organisation studies for quite some time.

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[i] The word 'entity' (derived from the latin *ens*, to be) refers to anything that is. Contrary to a common misconception, entities can be relational, concept-dependent and processual.

ii The approaches presented in this entry are exclusively inherited from Western philosophies. This partiality reflects both the poverty of our knowledge of non-Western philosophies and the dominance of Western conceptions in organization studies.

[iii] For discussions of the impossibility of objectivism, see the entries on Epistemology (Scherer et al.) and Decision Making (Edward).

iv We leave with Giddens the responsibility of describing the activities of natural scientists as hermeneutics.

v Even approaches that privilege 'conversations' and 'narratives' assume that participants will hear, and be influenced by one another.

vi To say that Foucault's project consisted in an explicitly uncommitted ontology does not mean that he was not himself implicitly committed to ontological assumptions. See for instance Al-Amoudi (2007).

vii Recall that hegemony consists in presenting a discourse as the only possible system of categories.