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Commentary

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Performing ontology

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Abstract

Ontology, and in particular, the so-called ontological turn, is the topic of a recent themed issue of *Social Studies of Science* (Volume 43, Issue 3, 2013). Ontology, or metaphysics, is in philosophy concerned with what there is, how it is, and forms of being. But to what is the science and technology studies researcher turning when he or she talks of ontology? It is argued that it is unclear what is gained by arguing that ontology also refers to constructed elements. The 'ontological turn' comes with the risk of creating a pseudo-debate or pseudo-activity, in which energy is used for no end, at the expense of empirical studies. This text rebuts the idea of an ontological turn as foreshadowed in the texts of the themed issue. It argues that there is no fundamental qualitative difference between the ontological turn and what we know as constructivism.

Keywords

constructivism, ontology, phenomenology, theory

Ontology, and in particular the so-called ontological turn, was the theme of a 2013 Special Issue of *Social Studies of Science* (*SSS*) (Volume 43, Issue 3). As one article, a survey by Van Heur et al. (2013), points out, 'ontology' has become a buzzword in social sciences writing. It is worth noting, however, that ontology has a long history in philosophy, in the branch of metaphysics (Moore, 2012), which is concerned with the fundamental nature of being or what there is. Unlike the empirically oriented discussions of ontology in the social sciences, the study of ontology in philosophy is generally non-empirical. So, it is not immediately clear to what the science and technology studies (STS) researcher is turning when they talk of ontology. My goal here is to challenge the idea of an ontological turn in STS for two reasons: first, I see no fundamental qualitative difference between the empirically oriented studies that invoke 'ontology' in the social

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sciences and what we have long known as constructivism; second, empirical ontological research closes the door to philosophy and its several thousand years of thinking, and in so doing ignores one source of critical reflection on the methods and assumptions of the social sciences.

The empirical studies in the Special Issue of *SSS* are of high quality. And let me just say that I do not disagree with what I take to be at the core of the analyses in these articles, namely, that 'social things' – identities, ties, objects, artifacts and the like, of both material and non-material nature – are constructions. The meanings of the things we observe and with which we engage in practice – such as fishing, boats, fishermen, and tools – come from their relations to one another and the scientific enterprise itself. In other words, like most social scientists, I agree that the things we observe and know are constructions. Social science today is generally constructivist, and indeed, as Van Heur et al. (2013) suggest, the contemporary STS discussion of ontology must be read against the background of constructivism (cf. Lynch, 2013). I think it is less clear what is gained by arguing that ontology also refers to socially constructed elements. The 'ontological turn' comes with the risk of creating a pseudo-debate or pseudo-activity, in which energy is used for no end, at the expense of empirical studies.

The first ideas of social constructivism were rooted in phenomenology, discussed in the works of Alfred Schütz (1967), although the term was first used in a review by Peter Berger (1964) and made a larger theme by Berger and Luckmann (1966), both students of Schütz. It is clear, though, that the social constructivist, later simply 'constructivist', movement grew strong because of research in the field of STS. Today, very few social scientists deny that the elements of our various spheres of life are constructed.

But invocation of the 'ontological' by STS researchers is supposed to add something to their constructivist analyses. Law and Lien (2013) claim that it is a way to see how realities are 'enacted in practice'. This means that

> Empirical studies of ontology are not trying to explain why differences arise within a single cosmological grounding [as a constructivist epistemology does, given a firm ontological base]. Instead, and quite differently, they are looking at what objects come to *be* in a relational, multiple, fluid, and more or less unordered and indeterminate (set of) specific and provisional practices; what it is that follows if ontologies are separated from assumptions about a singly ordered cosmos. (Law and Lien, 2013: 365)

The idea is that 'ontologies come into being' (Van Heur et al., 2013), which suggests that ontologies are made and thus something that can be 'discovered' by empirical research. So, unlike philosophical studies of ontology – which focus on questions about the nature of what exists – studies of ontology in STS are based on empirical observations about how realities are made or enacted in practices. The ontologists' emphasis on multiplicity, furthermore, implies that we would also have to accept competing enactments. Although the ontologists contrast this with constructivist analysis, what they describe closely resembles domains of empirical research with which we are familiar in STS, which often studies different knowledges, their constitutions, and their effects.

Indeed, according to Woolgar and Lezaun (2013: 324), observing how realities are enacted in practice is what STS researchers do. They question the distinction between ontology and epistemology, saying that

> it remains unclear how claims about the ontological composition of the world differ from more conventional propositions about the social construction, co-production, or performative constitution of a certain reality. (p. 322)

If ontologies are made through practices, discourses, or any other social processes, and we can use 'enacted', 'performed', 'made', 'fashioned', 'organized', or similar words to describe these processes, the study of ontology is simply what constructivist researchers have done for years.

Let us look closer to see how ontology, as a term and an idea, is approached in empirical research. When I read the articles in the special issue of *SSS*, I tried, so far as it is linguistically possible, to either omit the word 'ontology' or to replace it with 'epistemology' or some constructivist term. Let me illustrate with the case of Law and Lien's work on farmed salmon. They view their own case as an instance of how one should do research to study ontology more generally:

> Take any practice. Ask about its choreography. Ask how it weaves its relations and enacts its objects. If we think in ~~empirical-ontological~~constructivist fashion we discover difference and multiplicity. (Law and Lien, 2013: 371–372; text in quotation replaced to show my point)

Take another example. Brives (2013) studies the effects of clinical trials, arguing that the subject of research does not exist before beginning of the trial (p. 413). In this case, I have deleted the term ontology. She explains,

> The trial might determine, in part, what choices the women make and impose numerous exigencies; yet, the women never emerge as passive objects, subjected to the authority of research. This is because the ~~ontological~~ regimes they negotiate are multiple, and there is thus no need to adhere to the interests or dimensions emphasized by the medical staff. In fact, the mothers tend to have a relatively unified goal: their child's treatment and their own; they act to gain access to quality care in a context of widespread precarity. This is not a problem as long as everyone sticks to the script, as long as everything fits together. However, what happens when this ~~ontological~~ regime fades away, when the trial disappears? (p. 412)

This is a very solid and nicely executed study, but I fail to see the added value of talking about ontology. I still see only one idea being vindicated: 'ontologies' are consequences of what human beings do in each case studied. Empirically, these 'ontologies' can be the result of organization or performance. But is this not exactly the premise of constructionism?

It is, furthermore, somewhat paradoxical that some, like Law and Lien (2013) and Mol (2013), when presenting empirical material, do not make much use of either the term or the idea of ontology. Mol, for example, concludes her discussion of Dutch dieting techniques by commenting on the ontological aspect of what she does – namely, talking about what she calls ontonorms – saying, 'There is a lot left to analyse … I did not define *ontonorms* in the introduction and neither will I do so as part of the conclusion. Indeed I barely used the term' (p. 390). Despite this, we are asked by Mol not to define this term:

'Abstain from all attempts to make it definitive. Let's not make a *turn to ontonorms*, but rather keep them fluid, ambivalent, dancing and gerrymandering' (p. 390).

But the problem goes deeper. Mol (2013) claims that she is 'not so sure' whether it is possible to abandon the philosophical notion of ontology, and 'to use the term "ontology" in this willfully counterintuitive, playful, anti-philosophical way' (p. 380). The view that ontology is not only empirical, but also that 'realities are enacted practice' (Law and Lien, 2013: 364) or that ontology comes into being means that the solution to the ontological question is part of the premise. Put differently, researchers already 'know' ontologies, and empirical research is a way to show how a specific ontology, or even a specific 'thing', came into being. 'Ontology' is thus reduced to a term to describe something that is made, something we can study using traditional social science tools.

In its traditional philosophical use, 'ontology' refers to both what there is and the study of what there is, and as such arguably provides a way to reflect on the foundation of the social sciences, its premises, deficiencies, and the like (cf. Aspers and Kohl, 2013). According to Heidegger (1997, 2001), ontology is the basic form of thinking, and even matters of logic must be open to question. Projects that start with a set of assumptions that will not and cannot be questioned do not fall within the domain of philosophy. If we take the empirical ontological turn, such reflection and questioning will be reduced to an activity conditioned by the assumptions we make and what methods we have today. It is, in my view, naive to start with a social science approach that presupposes that what there is to study is precisely what we know there is. Such an approach will do little but perform ontology.

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