

Revisiting Ontology and Its Consequences

Star, Sarah (2009) Revisiting Ontology and Its Consequences. In *[2009] SPSP 2009: Society for Philosophy of Science in Practice (Minnesota, June 18-20, 2009)*.

Full text available as:

[Microsoft Word](#) - Requires a viewer, such as [Microsoft Word Viewer](#)

Abstract

In 1969, Quine enjoined philosophers to leave matters of ontology to the determination of scientists with the suggestion that a thorough-going naturalism – a philosophical position he considered to be necessitated by the empirical successes of the natural sciences – can recognise “no place for a prior philosophy.” Implicit in Quine’s view are the suppositions that the sciences themselves engage in ontology and that, ultimately, they are better equipped than philosophy to undertake such work. As a consequence of Quine’s injunction, and the wide-spread deference with which it was met, a hierarchy of influence has come to be instituted and broadly accepted within philosophy of science in which, science is understood to defer to nature and philosophy to science.

Drawing on the late works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this paper will challenge Quine’s characterisation of scientific work as intrinsically ontological in orientation and will advocate a renewed philosophical interest in ontology. It will suggest the scientist is motivated less by ontological concerns, than by the desire to gain a foothold and intervene and that, as such, her ontology is likely to be uncritical, objectivist, and somewhat ad hoc, thereby providing less than ideal working conditions for the philosopher concerned to understand how scientific knowledge is built and substantiated. By contrast, it will be the position of this paper that phenomenologically-oriented ontological models, founded in evidence drawn from scientists’ actual practice, will offer the valuable prospect of an important corrective for the scientist’s ontology, and, in so doing, will suggest fruitful ground upon which philosophers and scientists might constructively engage with one another.

In an effort to demonstrate these ideas more concretely, the bulk of the paper is taken up with a thought experiment conducted in three acts. In each case, an ontological understanding is sketched and its consequences for our conceptions of scientific and philosophic practice are briefly explored. Act one engages the classic understanding of a Kosmotheoros in confrontation with a World as Object; act two takes more seriously the consequences of our embodiment, recognising the limitations it introduces and the natal bond it seems automatically to afford us with the world; act three retains this recognition of both our embodiment and our embeddedness within a natural world, while also acknowledging our implantation within certain instituted social and cultural settings that are both constituted by and constitutive of us as living beings.

With the introduction of each new ontological model, our conceptions surrounding the nature of scientific knowledge and practice will be made to shift, as will our understanding of our own philosophical practice. In adopting an increasingly realistic sense of our position with respect to the world, we will find that we move from what I suggest is the untenable image of science as ontology and philosophy as verification and legitimation to a recognition of science as a kind of specialised culture and philosophy as a sort of poetry or literature. Finally, we will find that Quine’s linear and unidirectional hierarchy is forced to give way to a more hermeneutic conception.

Keywords: ontology, practice, body

Subjects: [General Issues: Thought Experiments](#)
[General Issues: Realism/Anti-realism](#)

Conferences and Volumes: [\[2009\] SPSP 2009: Society for Philosophy of Science in Practice \(Minnesota, June 18-20, 2009\)](#)

ID Code: 4824

Deposited By: [Star, Sarah](#)

Deposited On: 05 August 2009

Send feedback to: philsci-archive@mail.pitt.edu