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**Ontology and Epistemology –  
Stories of their Contexts.  
Implications for Research**

Ester Barinaga  
Centre for Advanced Studies in Leadership



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## **Ontology and Epistemology, Stories of their Contexts.**

### **Implications for Research**

Epistemology is an important part in every Ph.D. thesis. When as students we select an epistemological perspective, we tend to let aside all the others. Seeing such perspectives as resulting from their contexts of origin, however, we become aware of being open to other views and critical to the one selected.

When writing a Ph.D. dissertation ontology and epistemology are an important part in it. The formulation of the problem and the selection of the method depend on the view the student has of the world and her view of how to attain knowledge from it. In a simple way ontology can be understood as the view of the world (for a working understanding of such a foreign term!) and epistemology (another foreign term!) as the way to know it and the nature of this knowledge. Then, in our doctoral thesis we students have to directly or indirectly deal with epistemology and ontology.

As students, most of us appear to stick to one view almost forgetting that it is just one among many. The chosen view, as all the non-chosen ones, born and grew in a certain context and in a certain time. The contexts of origin are often different to the context and time when the thesis is written, making the selected view as convincing or fallacious as the alternative ones. We students should be aware that a constant critical attitude is rewarding for our texts and for ourselves. By sticking to a single epistemological view, however, we purge criticisms coming from other views.

#### ***Social Structure and Search of Meaning to Understand Ontology and Epistemology***

To understand an epistemological view I suggest it is worth looking at two elements from its context and time of origin. The first one is placed at the social level: the legitimation of the social structure. The stories told and heard in a society legitimate its social structure and frame its dominant view of the world. The second element is at the

individual level: the search for life's meaning<sup>1</sup>. The search for meaning is a characteristic of our human existence. In it we strive for security and certainty while facing the ambiguity and uncertainty of the future (that's why there are so many types of insurances!). Destiny's suspense and today's need for self-assurance are at the heart of the human search for meaning. And in the search the stories can help.

Religion and ideology are among the stories a society produces. Following the ideas of Mariano Corbí<sup>2</sup> (a Spanish theologian and anthropologist) I discuss them in terms of the social structure and the search for meaning. There is however much more to them, but that is far away my possibilities. Since such stories frame our view of the world, they might help us to better understand the ontological and epistemological views originating in different times of history.

Examples from Corbí are given below to illustrate how ontology (which I refer to as the view of the world) and epistemology (referred to as the way to know and the nature of knowledge) can be read through the lenses of the human search for meaning and the social structure. With the lenses on religion, ideology, and science suddenly become socially constructed stories. They are seen as different frames of interpretation, different ways of making sense of the social environment. Read in this way epistemological changes acquire a different character, which in turn makes one reflect over the consequences for one's attitude towards research in general and the doctoral thesis in particular.

### *Religion, a Story of its Context*

The rises and descends of the Nile steered old Egypt work and social structure. The river was both the source of life feeding the crops, and the ever-present menace of death by flood of those vital crops. In order to control the Nile a huge mass of people was needed under very specific times. Digging broad and deep canals, keeping them clean, and directing the waters was not a job that a single family could do. A punctual

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<sup>1</sup> 'Meaning' is here used with the sense of importance and function: a reason for life.

<sup>2</sup> Mariano Corbí suggests that the production system and the working factors of a society contribute to how that society values, interprets the world and attains knowledge from it. The values of a human group are reflected in the stories and tales produced by that human group. Such tales, which include myths, religion, ideology and modern science, tell us great many about the particular society reporting them (Corbí 1983).

large amount of human force was thus periodically needed. Only a great authority had the power to promptly joint such amount of people, what explains the hierarchical social structure of Pharaonic Egypt. It was a question of survival for that civilisation (Corbí 1983).

At the social level, religion was the constructed story legitimating and maintaining such structure of authority. The “reason” why the Pharaoh could exert such amount of power was his divine origin. He was the direct descendent of Ra, God of the Sun, with an overwhelming power to rule his people’s destiny. Religion was used as a legitimating story for the social structure of that civilisation. At the same time, it forced Egyptians to see their lives as being subject to God’s will and to interpret their world as God’s kingdom. The legitimating story became the interpreting lenses of a whole society.

At the individual level, religion eased a meaning to human life. It provided with an explanation for people’s existence, a reason for what they were doing. Religion reduced destiny’s ambiguity or at least helped to cope with it by presenting a picture of how that future could be.

Thus, the story of religion was able to respond to both issues: It legitimated the specific social structure and it gave certainty to the individual life.

### *Ideology and Modern Science are Stories Too*

Differences in the social conditions of a society lead to differences in the nature of the stories heard in it (Corbí 1983). In societies where a single all-encompassing authority was not a question of survival, religion was not as dominant and permeating. That gave room to other sorts of stories, and other types of arguments, ideology and rationality beginning to loom up. Stories changed form. Religion had to compete with ideology in the worlds of practice and politics, and with objectivity in the academic one.

In Ancient Greece no one type of work dominated over the others; agriculture, farming, and handcraft coexisted with equal importance. Contrary to what happened in Old Egypt, agriculture and cattle raising in Greece did not present special difficulties to the state. On the other side, the nature of handcraft work diverged from these other types of work, bringing special characteristics to that culture.

Handcraft work implies a series of steps in the worker's behaviour adapted to production; therefore, it implies the worker's possession of a scheme of sequential actions capable to bring into term the production of objects. In that plan of actions there is an ordination of means respect the end. This series of actions, done in an adequate measure as to the purpose, is the "ratio", the reason of what is obtained, and the relation among actions. In this sense, reason is the model of what has to be obtained and the whole scheme of actions. ... Rationality is also the capacity to construct models of series of actions that the subject can perform. (My own translation<sup>3</sup> from Corbí 1983)

The rational nature of handcraft imposes a distance between the object and the subject. Until then, the subject was considered the instrument and intermediary used by God to create the craft, the object coming directly from God's mind. Object and subject were not distinguished from each other. In classical Greece however the object has its origin in the artisan's actions and the mental model leading to them. The theological creator does not enter the scene. Religion risks lose its place and function in such society and philosophy enters the picture.

Many and of equal importance were the occupations in Greek civilisation. No one subordinated the others. No one way of thinking was imposed over the others. Myths, gods, rationality and philosophy lived in harmony, rationality having to wait for better times to command the others.

With the coming of technology and mass-production machines substituted the previous relation subject-object or artisan-handicraft. Engineers (or high-educated craftsmen)

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<sup>3</sup> El trabajo artesano supone una serie de pasos escalonados en la actuación del obrero adecuados a la producción; por tanto, supone la posesión por parte del obrero de un esquema de acciones en sucesión capaces de llevar a término la producción de objetos. En ese plan de acciones hay una ordenación de medios respecto al fin. Esta serie de acciones, realizadas en una medida adecuada de acuerdo con lo que se pretende, constituye la "ratio", la razón de lo obtenido y de la relación de unas acciones con respecto a otras. En este sentido la razón es el modelo de lo que hay que conseguir y la totalidad del esquema de las operaciones. ... Racionalidad es también la capacidad de construir modelos de series de acciones realizables por el sujeto. (Corbí 1983), p.439-440)

are in search of better machines, which can be independent of the human worker. Machines ask for better theories where useful knowledge is not a subjective one. It is objective knowledge helping to increase the capacity of machines, and generalisable knowledge allowing to replicate those machines. Hence, at the social level objectivity and general laws become a requisite for the modern machinist society and rationality the legitimating story. Good science (objective, rational and generalisable) turns to be the new creed, becoming God Science!

As for the search for meaning at the individual level: if machines are products of human rationality, the creating power does not come from any God and religion loses one of its purposes. With the denial of religion human being suddenly lacks a frame of interpretation and a reason of being. This hole can be seen as filled by ideology. The “invisible hand” in the liberal western world and the “plan” in the socialist world become the new religions.

Religion, ideology and the objectivity of modern science are thus understood here as variations of the same phenomenon: A social need to legitimate its structure and a human need to give meaning to life, significance to existence and function to one's personal history. Religion, ideology and science would be temporary, socially constructed faiths (or truths!) giving sense to life and a view of the world. In their time and context they are seen as the ultimate truth. But made up truths!

### *From Modernism to Postmodernism, or from One Story to Another*

Continuing with our story, society develops and the production system suffers a transformation from the production of goods to the production of knowledge, knowledge in the form of science, technology and new forms of organisation. Formal knowledge and the new telecommunication and information technologies are at the centre of the industries (Corbí 1996).

This knowledge society survives from continuous innovation and change. Where knowledge generation is at the core of the social structure, everybody's truths and interpretations need to be considered and respected since knowledge neither comes

from a single source nor many but a combination of these many. Diversity and plurality are intrinsically valued and explicitly sought as they enhance creativity, contributing to the creation of knowledge. A focus on knowledge creation recognises the fragmentation and plurality of contemporary cultural and social reality, which in turn is enhanced by the new possibilities opened up by the new technologies.

Objective and general knowledge loses its dominant role to share it with more subjective and perceptive ideas. Boundaries between competing disciplines are traversed, the rigid norms of the so-called scientific method are transgressed, and writing conventions are broken (Richardson 1994). Creativity gains a place thanks to its ability to promote knowledge and innovation. The terrain is prepared for the arrival of postmodern science.

At the social level the transition from the production of goods to the production of knowledge involves a transformation in the way of thinking and understanding the world: from a quantitative logic to a more qualitative one. Society – focused in knowledge, tolerant of diversity, stressing innovation, and emphasising creativity – admits that knowledge is neither eternal nor universal. Instead it is temporary and local. The nature of the legitimating story thus has to change from presenting *the* truth to presenting *a* view.

Clive Beck skilfully echoes the spirit of the knowledge society:

No longer should we see ourselves as seeking to uncover a pre-existing reality; rather, we are involved in an interactive process of knowledge creation. We are developing a ‘working understanding’ of reality and life, one which suits our purposes. And because purposes and context vary from individual to individual and from group to group, what we arrive at is in part autobiographical; it reflects our ‘personal narrative’, our particular ‘site’ in the world. (Beck 1993)

Beck maintains here that the creation of knowledge and even the interpretation of reality are personal and biographical. They are as subjective as they can be since they are individual-dependent. It can be said though that the pragmatism of “developing a ‘working understanding’ of reality and life” has always been so. The difference now is that it is done consciously.



At the individual level of the human search for meaning we can refer to Andersson and Sylwan's analysis in Sweden of the structural change and its consequences (Andersson and Sylwan 1998). The authors maintain that the development towards a knowledge-centred society<sup>4</sup> involves a change of values. From freedom to *mutual respect*; from equality<sup>5</sup> to *equal conditions* independently of sex, ethnic or any other differences; from solidarity to *tolerance*; from quantitative economic growth to qualitative *sustainable development*; from productivity to *creativity*; from exploitation of nature<sup>6</sup> to the *care and conservation of nature* (Andersson and Sylwan 1998, pp. 95-96). Values are a frame of reference for our actions and behaviours telling us what to expect of others, giving some sort of security. This change of values is thus seen as a change in the view of the world and another way to look for individual certainty.

Therewith, I here argue that the once totalitarian, all-embracing views of the world imposed first by religion, and then by ideology and modern science, do not serve the purpose of the new social structure. They were the cultural legitimations of societies based in more material production systems no longer fitting the immaterial nature of today's main goods: information and knowledge. In this era religion, ideology and modern science compete with other types of explanations, explanations of a more subjective nature. They do not disappear but lose their dominant status to give space to postmodern attitudes.

### *Stories as Mere Commodities*

The main story told to the reader along this paper is that our ways of thought and views of the world are mutable and relative to the social structure of the moment. Culture or whatever is usually included within that term, –mythology, religion, ideology, the scientific method or the postmodern ideal– is the constructed story used by human kind to adapt to the environment, legitimate it, and give meaning to one's life.

When the worldview our ancestors made and believed as *the* truth is no longer useful to us we change it for a different view that we again exalt to the status of *the real* truth.

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<sup>4</sup> They actually talk of a K-society, 'K' standing in Swedish for kunskap, kreativitet and kompetens (knowledge, creativity and competence).

<sup>5</sup> Equality has traditionally been understood as 'sameness'. Yet, in this epoch differences are recognised and valued. 'Sameness' denies difference, ignoring the potentials brought by diversity. Diversity and the advantages of plurality are however recognised and taken into gain with the term 'equal conditions'.

As if we were dealing with simple commodities, we changed mythology for religion and religion for ideology when an external creator was no longer an answer to the structure of society. Change in the legitimating story changed our own way of interpreting the world. People did not longer see the punishment of a malevolent God in their destiny of misery. They began to see it as coming from the oppression among social classes. And similarly happened when society changed focus towards constant knowledge creation. When objective and general knowledge was not able to legitimate it, we created a new story with a different type of knowledge: A type of knowledge that can warrant continuous change and innovation. Modernism becomes obsolete, opening the door for a rereading of the old texts, but this time with the lenses of subjectivism and postmodernism (McCloskey 1986; Richardson 1994).

The idea that religion, ideology and science are somehow related is not new. The known anthropologist Clifford Geertz already studied this topic. He described them as ‘cultural systems’ distinguished by their symbolic strategy. While science adopts an attitude of disinterest with a spare, analytic style<sup>7</sup>, ideology has an attitude of commitment with an “ornate, vivid and deliberately suggestive style” (Geertz 1973a, pp.230-231). In another essay he says that religion is another system of symbols - a ‘cultural system’ to use Geertz’s term – synthesising a view of the world and a way of life. For him, they are strategies for avoiding “the philosophical dilemmas as well as the psychological stress from indeterminism” (Geertz 1973b, p.124).

Similar to the ‘cultural system’ of Geertz and to the ‘cultural legitimating story’ of this paper, Ference Marton talks of ‘collective intellect’. He says:

This collective intellect can thus be seen as a structured pool of ideas, conceptions, and beliefs underlying the possible interpretations (or possible constructions) of reality and it is enhanced steadily, as new possibilities are continually added to those previously available. (Marton 1981, p. 198)

No matter how different they might self-advocate to be, religion, ideology, scientific method and postmodernism are viewed here as being the same thing. They are frames

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<sup>6</sup> Note that the first three named values are the legend of the French Revolution, while the three last ones stem from the characteristics of the production system.

<sup>7</sup> Geertz talks about modern, objective science.

to interpret the world, stories legitimating varied social structures and systems of value giving meaning to the human life. By advocating *their* truth they tend to deny alternative truths. Although we tend to think that humanity has progressed the presented interpretation sees it as a mere change with no connotation of improvement. Along history we have only left a view of the world and substituted it for another which better responds to its time social structure. In this sense, views of the world are taken and left in the same way as we buy and sell mere commodities.

### ***But, is Postmodernism Better?***

But, have we come any further? Are we still looking for the ultimate truth? Or, have we learnt to live together with the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent to human existence? And, do we still need a legitimating belief for our social structure? Or, have we learnt to accept the responsibility attached to freedom?

Two things can be said in this respect related to the two levels of discussion used across the paper. The first one, the social level, concerns the postmodernist posture towards reality and truth; the second one, the individual level, refers to their attitude towards the human search for stability and certainty.

#### **Social level: legitimating story**

Postmodernism and subjectivism deny the existence of an objective eternal truth. They go even further. They even say that the self-advocated objective science has never been so. Science was, is and will be subjective! Theory precedes observation, turning objectivism into an impossible task (Chalmers 1994).

As I see it however the problem lies in some post-modernists' attitude that their truth is *the* truth and that no other external, objective truth is attainable or even exists (appealing to a more radical position). They condemn those scientists defending an objectivist position. Adopting such attitude they are doing exactly the same as what they are so strongly fighting against: the intolerance and almost dictatorship involved in the faith of a single believe. They are taking their perspective in a totalitarian way!

This point is very well illustrated with an example from Barbara Czarniawska. She takes David Lodge's novel "Nice Work" where Robyn, a post-feminist and a post-structuralist academic living in a world of symbols, enters the world of practice represented by Vic. She intends to study organisational life. Vic does the same in Robyn's world.

Vic takes his world to be the only correct one: He takes it for granted. Thus, Robyn's feelings of superiority: As a poststructuralist, she knows better than that. Or so she thinks – Lodge is showing us that, although Robyn relativizes Victor's world, she takes her own world for granted just like Victor does. (Czarniawska 1998, pp. 21-22)

The problem lies in the contradiction between the postmodernist explicitly stated relativism and its own claim of general validity of their view. Can this be seen as an intent (conscious or unconscious) to legitimate the structure of today's society? If so, is such a legitimation useful for society? I cannot and will not try to give an answer to such questions. It might be stimulating however for a more self-critical attitude towards one's beliefs and position.

### **Individual level: search for meaning**

Concerning the search for stability while facing the uncertainty brought by our destiny I do not think we have come much further. Even if recognising the divided, diverse and unstable nature of the present world, postmodernists still search for something they can hold and where they can feel safe from ambiguity:

Precisely because we live in a changing, fragmented, 'postmodern' world, we need whatever stability we can find. (Beck 1993)

By realising that postmodernism is more of the same but with a different colour one feels tempted to stop trying understanding what it affirms. But, would this do any good? I do not think so. Postmodernism involves a tolerance for diversity, even if sometimes intolerant attitudes are adopted by some postmodernists. Postmodernism embraces acceptance of multiple realities, even if sometimes postmodernists reject the

alternatives. Postmodernism implies the transgression of human-drawn boundaries, even if sometimes postmodernists themselves draw other borders.

One thing is the discourse (postmodernism), and another very different thing is the put into practice of the discourse (postmodernists). It is the step from idea to practice that gives space to the criticism just made. Being aware of the incoherence we will be in a better position than our forefathers not to repeat what we are criticising. We might even be able to learn how to cope with the ambiguity our human condition entails! Let's try at least...

### *Listening and Favouring a Critical Attitude in Research*

My presentation is only a view; another reading of history that may lead to several epistemological reflections. The first one points to a critical attitude towards our research field. The main traditions in it may be the result of the view of a given era more than a cumulative knowledge that is valid forever. To appreciate the relativity, temporality and locality of our ways of thinking and interpreting supports a critical attitude towards what is believed to be true in a field. Tracing back the history of the field may discover a determinative origin. We might even find out that the borders traced between our discipline and neighbouring ones are historically bounded! And that such field could as well have belonged to another area of knowledge. This opens up for fertilisation across disciplines and interdisciplinary studies.

In this line of thought lies Michael Quinn Patton's awareness of the richness of being open to other disciplines and curious for new perspectives. He defends the advantages of more frequent revolutions within evaluative methods, even if such revolutions respond to the scientific vanity of drawing attention towards itself:

Mao Tse Tung commented on the tendency of human beings to setting into numbing routines when he said that a revolution is needed every 20 years. Revolutions in the collection of evaluative data may be needed much more often. One such revolution may be to introduce a totally new approach to evaluation simply for the purpose of attracting renewed attention to the evaluation process. At the time, changing the method may produce new insights or at least force people to deal with the old insights in a new way. (Patton 1990, p.138)

The second reflection is a call to open up for other views. Once an epistemological view has been selected for the research problem, it is easy to fall into the temptation of not listening to ideas and criticisms coming from people defending different views. The researcher risks getting blind by her own view. This can be interpreted however as showing an attitude of possessing *the* truth. Opening up to others' truths, admitting their arguments and deeply understanding one's prejudices (often not very rational!), can teach us to see the fragility of our stances. It can help us to relativise our position, seeing that it might be rooted in other more fundamental needs (like the need for certainty) or that it might be determined by our own personal biography. For instance me. Being a Spanish woman in Sweden may have made me especially biased towards culture, different views of the world, and relativity of our most deep beliefs. And that lies behind what I say. Who knows if the story in this paper is just a result of my biography and circumstances? "I am me and my circumstances" said the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset.

The third and last reflection is a drift to listen. If we have been able to relativise our position, the research problem may gain from listening to different knowledge areas. The formulation of the research question might even change! It is maybe the fear for this change that pushes most of us to unconsciously stick to one view. Real listening can be challenging because it enables the understanding of how relative and uncertain is what we think is true.

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## About the Author

Ester Barinaga is a Research Assistant at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Leadership at the Stockholm School of Economics and a doctoral student at ESADE-Barcelona. In her Ph.D. she works with multicultural groups in an organisational context with an empirical and theoretical focus. She can be contacted at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Leadership, Stockholm School of Economics, P.O.Box 6501, SE-113 83 Stockholm, Sweden. Tel.: +46 8 736 96 23.

E-mail [Ester.Barinaga@hhs.se](mailto:Ester.Barinaga@hhs.se).



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*P.O. Box 6501, SE-113 83 Stockholm, Sweden.*  
*Visiting address: Saltmätargatan 13-17.*  
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