



# Ontology and Epistemology

**Doing Political Research**

# Ontology

- Theory of being: What is the nature of social reality?
- Is there are real world 'out there' independent of our perception?
- Essentialists/foundationalists believe there are essential differences of being
- Anti-foundationalists emphasise the social construction of social phenomena
- Democracy vs dictatorship

# Epistemology

- Theory of knowledge: What is the nature of knowledge about society and politics?
- Can we observe 'objective' relationships between social phenomena? If so, how?
- Empiricists focus on causal explanation and testing predictions
- Interpretivists focus on understanding and the 'double hermeneutic' (the world is interpreted by an actor; this interpretation is interpreted by the researcher)

# Marsh and Furlong

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- Three traditions in political research
  - Positivist
  - Interpretist
  - Realist
- Your philosophical commitments are fundamental; you cannot change them according to the question you want to ask or the method you want to use

## Chapter 1

### **A Skin, not a Sweater: Ontology and Epistemology in Political Science**

DAVID MARSH AND PAUL FURLONG

This chapter introduces the reader to the key issues that underpin what we do as social or political scientists. Each social scientist's orientation to their subject is shaped by their ontological and epistemological position. Most often those positions are implicit rather than explicit, but, regardless of whether they are acknowledged, they shape the approach to theory and the methods which the social scientist utilises. At first these issues seem difficult but our major point is that they are not issues that can be avoided (for a similar view see Blyth, Chapter 14). They are like a skin not a sweater: they cannot be put on and taken off whenever the researcher sees fit. In our view, all students of political science should recognise and acknowledge their own ontological and epistemological positions and be able to defend these positions against critiques from other positions. This means they need to understand the alternative positions on these fundamental questions. As such, this chapter has two key aims. First, we will introduce these ontological and epistemological questions in as accessible a way as possible in order to allow the reader who is new to these issues to reflect on their own position. Second, this introduction is crucial to the readers of this book because the authors of the subsequent chapters address these issues and they inform the subject matter of their chapters. As such, this basic introduction is also essential for readers who want fully to appreciate the substantive content of this book.

The chapter is divided into three major sections. The first section describes what we mean by these two terms 'ontology' and 'epistemology' and considers briefly why these questions are important. The second section then outlines the different positions on ontology and epistemology and the arguments which have been put forward for and against these positions. Finally, we shall illustrate how these different positions shape the approaches that researchers take to their research by focusing on research in two broad areas: globalisation and multilevel governance.



# Positivists

- Ontologically foundationalist, epistemologically empiricist
  - Natural science and social science are basically the same
  - Focus on testing theory through direct observation and establishing causal relationships
  - Empirical and normative questions can and should be separated
  - Criticisms
    - Any knowledge from the senses is mediated by concepts when analysed
    - Most social structures cannot be observed by the senses and can be changed by agents
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# Interpretist

- Ontologically anti-foundationalist, epistemologically interpretivist
  - Rejection of objectivity
  - Focus on discourse and the interpretations of social phenomena
  - Criticisms
    - There is no basis to judge validity of knowledge claims
    - How would an interpretist know if their theory was wrong?
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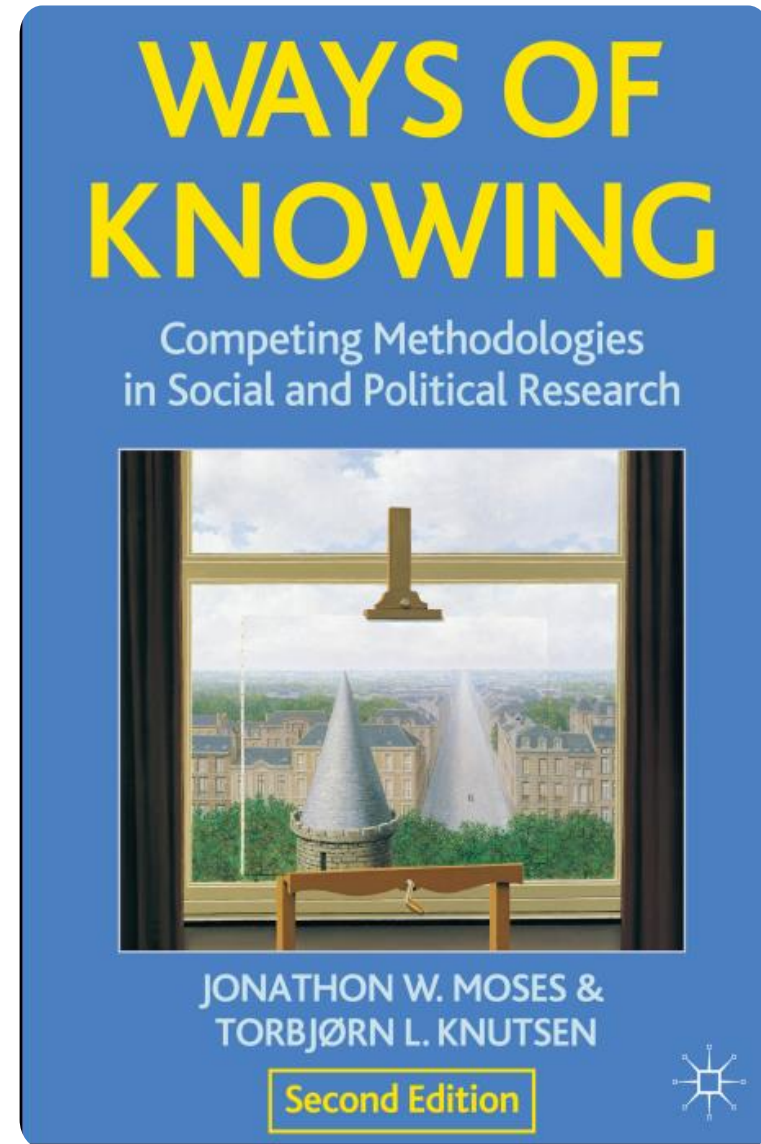


# Realists

- Ontologically foundationalist, epistemologically interpretivist
  - Reality and appearance may be different
  - Not all social phenomena are directly observable
  - Observation is mediated by theory
  - Attempt to establish causal relationships
  - Criticism
    - Reality/appearance distinction means that theories are unfalsifiable
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# Moses and Knutsen

- Two 'ways of knowing' in political research
  - Naturalists (positivists)
  - Constructivists (interpretivists)
  - While embracing different ontologies and epistemologies, they share "an appreciation of honesty; an attention to detail and empirical accuracy; an embrace of reason and the utility of rhetoric; the need to address and minimize unwanted bias; and the desire to produce knowledge which can subsequently be reproduced by others who follow in their footsteps"
- "methods and methodologies...should be changed in accordance with the ontological and epistemological status of the question under study" ie philosophy is a sweater, not a skin





# Ontology, Epistemology and Mixed Methods

- The quantitative-qualitative divide is often considered a clash of research philosophies
  - But is this always so?
- Some methods do clash eg large-n studies aimed at finding correlations between variables and in-depth interviews aimed at interpreting meaning
- Can such clashing methods be used in the same research project to answer the same question?

# Conclusion

- Most researchers do not consider ontology and epistemology
- But philosophical commitments will implicitly drive methodological choices
- It is important to be aware of your own philosophy when conducting research
- Debates over
  - whether these philosophies are skins or sweaters
  - the extent to which mixed methods 'make sense' philosophically