

Resource 2: Philosophy, theory and beyond: concepts for geographical research

The following additional information foregrounds further some of the ideas introduced in Chapter 2. Notably it explores the concepts that we associate with ‘ways of thinking’: philosophy, metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, and theory. Read on to see how these are useful to understand in developing your own dissertation.

Philosophy refers to a way of thinking about our existence. Craig notes (2002) that most of us hold philosophies unknowingly. As he states, ‘most of us favour some very general picture of what the world is like. Perhaps we think there’s a God who made it all, including us, or, on the contrary, we think it’s all a matter of chance and natural selection’ (Craig, 2002: 1). Philosophies can exist on this sort of broad scale, or relate to more specific beliefs about the world. For example, some may believe that climate change – as a distinct topic concerning our planet – is a consequence of human action that has negatively impacted the very make-up of the Earth. Others may refute such claims, believing that changes to climate are all part and parcel of a natural process through which the Earth heats and cools in periodic cycles. Philosophies then, are not abstract – they are linked to our values, beliefs, desires and understanding of the world around us. Fundamentally though, they pertain to questions of what we think exists and the meaning of existence.

When dealing with philosophy geographers tend to be a little more specific – referring to **metaphysics** and **ontology**. Metaphysics is a strand of philosophy that seeks to explain ideas of existence – to uncover the assumptions that underpin a particular philosophical way of thinking (why, then, do we believe climate change is caused by humans and not natural processes?) Tim Cresswell’s recent work on mobility is a good example of how geographers draw on metaphysics through their research. In investigating mobile lives, he has drawn on

what he calls a ‘metaphysics of fixity and flow’ (2006). In feudal societies, people held a philosophy or belief that movement beyond local areas was dangerous and transgressive. During this medieval period, people were tied to the land as there were no means of transportation for long journeys. Strangers who arrived from elsewhere were feared and loathed. As such, a metaphysics of fixity prevailed – a knowledge of existence based on stability, rootedness and permanence. Cresswell demonstrates how this philosophy shaped particular socio-cultural and political actions as travellers and vagabonds were subject to prejudice by a wider society that shared such views on the nature of human existence (2006). Later, in a globalising and changing world, Cresswell (2006) explores how an alternative philosophy of existence – an opposing metaphysics – emerged. This was a metaphysics of ‘flow’. Indeed, many geographers today who are exploring human relations with space and place understand these connections to be fluid ones, of motion, movement and mobility (see Adey, 2009).

Philosophical and metaphysical questions are fundamentally questions of what we call **ontology**. Ontology refers to beliefs about what exists or can exist. Ontology, as Bhaskar contends, is concerned with what the world is like for knowledge to come into being (1997). In other words, what is the shape and character of the world and how does this shape what we know about it? Continuing with our previous example, in the past, geographers would often understand the world as existing of spaces that were discretely and neatly contained, bordered, and bounded (home, town, city, region and so on). This idea of ‘what the world is like’ shaped a particular knowledge that emerged. Humanistic geographers, for example, conceive of a world of places that are ‘centres of meaning’ (see Tuan, 1977). For places to be meaningful, we have to attach significance to discrete pockets of space (that can exist on any scale; a living room, a village, the nation, the earth). This idea of how the world exists

brought about knowledge that defined human relationships with place to be based on intimate experiences of being ‘in place’ (within a given locale); with those not belonging to particular territories, spaces and places being ‘out of place’ (see Cresswell, 1996). This, in turn, created an exclusionary and ‘reactionary’ geographical knowledge – *because of how we understand the world to exist* (ontology). Geographers have since refined their ontological position (their beliefs about what exists). For most (but not all) geographers, space is said to exist as an assemblage of networked, global connections (see Massey, 1997). Although geographers insist that borders and boundaries still *exist* (see Escobar, 2001 for example), they likewise appreciate the overlaps and connections between places, scales and hierarchies. For Massey, an ontological shift from a world that exists as ‘closed’, ‘defensive’ and bordered, to one that is ‘outward-looking’ and consists of ‘interconnections’ and ‘flows’ presents us with a new form of knowledge – one that is more inclusive and tolerant of difference – in view of who belongs where. Latterly, this idea of a ‘fluid ontology’ has been developed in relation to other topics of investigation. Jon Anderson’s recent work on surfing (2012) contends that an ontology of space as demarcated and divided is unhelpful for getting to grips with what it is to experience the water when surfing. For him the world instead, exists as a fluid amalgamation of mixing; where bodies, elements, spaces and times collapse and coalesce into one another (Anderson, 2012). For him, a stable ontology is unhelpful; a fluid ontology of existence makes possible the sort of knowledge that Anderson brings into being.

Crucially though, such ontological questions (of what exists) are always linked to **epistemology** (the means through which we know what exists in the first place!) As Cresswell notes, epistemology is ‘how we know what we know’ (2013: 4). Epistemology is always linked to practice – to the very ways in which our knowledge of existence is formed. As Aiken and Valentine tell us ‘ontology is grounded in epistemology and all epistemologies

are embedded in social practice' (2006: 5). For example, returning to Anderson, a fluid ontology (a belief about the world existing of flows, connections and convergences) is only possible through the practice of surfing – of being in the water and feeling the waves (epistemology).

Theory, or *theories*, connect to philosophy but are a more specific 'set of connected statements used in explanation' (Johnston et al., 2000: 826). As Aiken and Valentine tell us (2006: 6), 'philosophy encompasses larger ways of knowing' – in other words, philosophy relates to the 'bigger picture'. Theories hone in on the particular, developing a more detailed set of ideas in relation to 'real societies' (Peet, 1998: 6). On the one hand, theories might be individual – we have a theory about this, or that – on the other hand, they are embedded within particular, established frames of thinking. For example, particular phenomena, events or places might be explored through a frame of Marxism, or a poststructuralism, or posthumanism. Theories are manifold, and there are even theories within theories (for example there are differing types of Marxist theorising – see Peet, 1998). Yet theories, in whatever guise, are like a 'lens' or a 'frame' that 'impose order on messy reality' (Cresswell, 2013: 6). They help us make sense of things. They draw from the world in their formulation (i.e. they emerge from the 'real world'), but they are also used to explore that world as a framework of understanding (Peet, 1998). As such, it is best not to 'fit' the world as we know it into theoretical frames, but to explore how a particular set of ideas emerge from, and help us understand, that which we are exploring (see also Cresswell, 2013; Shurmer-Smith, 2002).

Useful references

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