Chapter 5

POSITIVISM OR NON-POSITIVISM – TERTIUM NON DATUR

A Critique of Ontological Syncretism in IS Research

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Abstract: This paper revisits the debate between positivism and its alternatives in the field of information systems from a philosophical point of view. It will argue that the heart of the debate is the ontological difference between the views of reality as observer-independent versus observer-dependent. The logical axiom of the excluded third (tertium non datur) informs us that two contradictory options cannot simultaneously be true. The paper will discuss what the incompatibility of the ontological positions of positivism and its alternatives means for IS research. It will discuss why scholars attempt to mix the two and will spell out the consequences of an acceptance of their incompatibility. The paper will end by arguing that this debate needs to be contextualized with the problem of positivism versus non-positivism in society and it will ask whether a tolerant coexistence of the two approaches is feasible. Without this contextualized understanding of ontology in general, regional ontologies in IS are not likely to be successful as they will be based on unclear bases.

Key words: positivism; non-positivism; interpretivism; ontology; epistemology; methodology

1. INTRODUCTION

"In my view, it is time to assign the rhetoric of positivism versus interpretivism to the scrap heap. It no longer serves a useful purpose. On the contrary, it promotes unhelpful schisms among scholars." (Ron Weber, Editor-in-Chief, MISQ (2004, p. xi))

Many information systems (IS) scholars probably sympathize with Weber's sentiment and agree that they have heard enough of the discussion
Raj Sharman, Rajiv Kishore and Ram Ramesh

of positivism versus interpretivism. There seems to be little progress in the debate and it has the potential to hurt the discipline. This paper will nevertheless address the issue of positivism and its alternatives as philosophical foundations of IS research. The reason for this is that there seems to be a growing tendency to mix positivist and non-positivist research. The paper will argue that such philosophical syncretism is suspicious for logical reasons.

The argument presented here is a philosophical one. First, the main argument is based on the ontological assumptions of research. Ontology is one of the classical sub-disciplines of philosophy. Second, it will argue that, in order to understand the current state of philosophical syncretism of IS research, one need to look at the relationship between ontology, epistemology, and methodology, which opens the doors to other philosophical areas. Third, the central problem discussed here is a conceptual one. "Philosophy has always been concerned with conceptual clarifications" (Tugendhat, 1992 p. 113; cf. Ricoeur, 1995; Wittgenstein, 1963). Finally, the heart of the argument, the tertium non datur, the proposition of the excluded third, is an integral part of Aristotelian propositional logic.

It is generally accepted that research is based on several interconnected philosophical assumptions. This paper will follow Davies (1991) in concentrating on the relationship of ontology (theory of being / reality / essence), epistemology (theory of knowledge), and methodology (theory of method / action). The question of which research philosophy or approach is appropriate in IS has a long history (cf. Pettigrew, 1985) but is not likely to be resolved (Petter & Gallivan, 2004). The ontological divide between different research philosophies has been a continuing topic of debate in the philosophy of science and can be traced back to the great philosophers (cf. Monod, 2002) and even to the earliest writings on western philosophy. The aim of the paper is therefore not to "solve" the problem, which may be impossible (Fitzgerald & Howcroft, 1998), but to clarify its roots and meaning and to spell out the theoretical and practical consequences of the dichotomy between positivism and non-positivism.

The paper thus aims to clarify some questions of general philosophical ontology in the area of information systems. One should note that such a general ontology is of central importance if one wants to discuss regional ontologies, as suggested by Kishore, Sharman & Ramesh (2004). Regional ontologies and the universes of discourse they are based upon rely on general ontology. The very idea that there are regional universes of discourse and that these allow the classification of specific ontological structures is already a strong ontological claim, which, as the present paper will argue, is likely to be contentious. The dichotomy between positivism and non-