

Abstract

Title: Concerning Being. Ontology and its methodological relevance within Positivism, Relativism and Critical Realism

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The main purpose of this thesis is to argue for the methodological relevance of a critical realist, stratified ontology for the process of scientific knowledge production. The case of anorexia nervosa is chosen to illustrate the argument. The articulated question is as follows: What is the comparative advantage and relevance of a critical realist ontology compared to alternative ontologies, in particular those, which inform positivist and relativist methodologies? In order to answer this question an immanent critical approach to both positivism and relativism is applied from a critical realist point of view.

The characteristic feature of critical realist ontology is that it views reality as (a) structured (b) stratified, (c) differentiated and (d) continually changing. In this way critical realism acknowledges the existence of structured entities with generative powers acting in different strata of reality, both natural and social. This implies that the properties of these entities (what they are) and their ways of acting (what they do) must be studied from a pluralist and relational point of view.

Positivism is criticised on the grounds that its methodology is informed by an empirical realist ontology that uplifts human experience, one contingent aspect of reality, as the explanatory factor for reality as a whole. Radical relativism, in its turn, is criticised on the grounds that its methodology is informed by an ontology that uplifts language, one contingent aspect of reality, as the explanatory factor for reality as a whole. That is to say, both positivism and radical relativism are limited to flat anthropocentric ontologies that lead to reductionist conclusions. An example of this, in the case of positivism is its conception of human beings as passive receptors of given facts. In the case of radical relativism, it is its conception of human beings as socially constructed through and through, that is, as lacking personal emergent properties.

In summary, the absence of a stratified ontology in both positivist and radical relativist methodologies lead to the problem of reductionism, blocking, among other things, the study of a complex and stratified reality, natural, social and human. In the light of these methodological shortcomings, I claim that critical realism provides better conceptual tools necessary for scientific research on complex areas of study, including anorexia nervosa and other biopsychosocial phenomena.

Keywords: ontology, methodology, critical realism, positivism, relativism, anorexia nervosa, sociology, multifactorial explanation, biopsychosocial.