

Observing the Political World:*

Ontology, Truth, and Science

Abstract

This paper provides a discussion of our ability to observe the world. In doing so, it provides a brief sketch of the classical, modern, and postmodern ontological positions. I also discuss the purpose of theory, contrasting two distinct views: (1) theory should reveal truth and (2) theory should be useful. In sum, I argue that observation is problematic, that theory is heuristic, and in the conclusion I briefly discuss the implications of these arguments for political scientists.

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1 Introduction

Each of us routinely makes observations about the world around us. In doing so, we rarely concern ourselves with the philosophical issue of ontology, or the study of what is. To wit, in our daily lives we make observations and put them to use and do not dwell on ontology. Similarly, the average citizen, politician, and pundit make observations about the political world. In doing so, they rarely (if ever) concern themselves with ontology. Lastly, political scientists regularly make observations about the political world.

I argue in this paper that observation is problematic. Put differently, observation is not a simple, straightforward task that does not require reflection. I begin my argument by considering a passage from one of Plato's Socratic dialogues: the allegory of the cave. You may recall from your undergraduate studies that in book VII of *Republic* Plato invites Glaucon to consider a cave where prisoners are chained from birth and whose world is composed only of one another and shadows of puppets on the cave wall in front of them.¹ Plato suggests that it would be natural for the prisoners to name the shadows and believe that they were the things of which the world was composed. Plato does not ask Glaucon to do so, but I ask you to consider someone who was not a prisoner of the cave, but was familiar with it. She lives on earth and is familiar with the empirical world that the prisoners only experience as shadows of puppets (i.e., she has seen trees, cows, buildings, etc., not just tree puppets, cow puppets, building puppets, etc. or the shadows these puppets cast). Plato suggests that only philosophers who have come to know truth and justice are like the woman who lives outside the cave whereas the rest of us are like the prisoners of the cave—we observe shadows and believe they are real. The story is useful because it suggests that observation is problematic—our senses can deceive us.

Plato's story raises questions about the existence of a 'real' world and our ability to know it. Can we know 'reality' or can we only know some approximation of 'reality'? Thinking about these issues also raises a question about whether our beliefs about regularities in the world (I will call these beliefs 'theories,' by which I mean explanations of the regular causal relations we observe) are 'true.' That is, is it possible to determine which of a set of theories is true? These issues about theories and their truth con-

¹It should not surprise the reader that not all Platonic scholars hold the position that the allegory of the cave represents Plato's ontological views. It turns out, however, that this debate is not directly relevant as I am using Plato's allegory to illustrate a problem, not to study Plato's views, and the story is useful for that purpose because it is so widely known.

tent are raised because Plato's story seems to suggest that our beliefs and observations are not entirely independent of one another.

Consider a different story that makes the same point. I submit that we are entertained by magicians because they perform feats that we believe are not possible—yet they perform them right before our eyes. When one observes a magic performance one is forced to choose between one's beliefs and one's observation. Which of the two do you choose to accept: your prior beliefs about what is possible or what you observe? Most of us stick with our prior beliefs and wonder how the magician was able to trick us.

Plato's allegory of the cave and the example of a magic show suggest that observation is not a simple, straightforward task. That is, these stories suggest that 'knowing the world' is not as simple as looking, listening, touching, and tasting. Obtaining knowledge is more difficult than that. Yet these brief stories do not help us get at the heart of the matter. It turns out that over the past several thousand years of western philosophy there have been three major schools of thought regarding observation (or ontology): the classical, modern, and postmodern schools. In the remainder of this essay I briefly introduce each of these schools and describe what makes them unique. Doing so will force us to address the challenges of observation.²

Allow me to add a caveat before briefly discussing the classical, modern, and postmodern ontological positions. It should not surprise you that you will find in the library hundreds of volumes on the subjects of ontology, metaphysics, epistemology, and knowledge. An essay such as this which intends to offer a thumbnail sketch of such a literature is necessarily guilty of caricature. I am happy to defend my particular caricature as useful, but the reader should appreciate that the sketches presented below are incomplete. Further, any literature as large as the one summarized here has substantial debate regarding the use of labels (i.e., classical, modern, postmodern, etc.).

²There is another sense to which these stories miss an interesting point. Above I argued that people routinely make observations about their surroundings and that they do so without concerning themselves with ontology; that is, most people do not consider the observation process to be problematic. In our daily lives, this is perfectly defensible, as the success of our species attests. A useful way to understand why is to understand that observation is theory-laden and, thus, intellectually challenging. To concern ourselves with the development of explicit theories to account for all of our daily observations would be intellectually prohibitive. Instead, one might describe our daily intellectual existence by arguing that we develop beliefs and act on them, changing those beliefs when experience suggests that we should. But we do not invest much energy trying to specify those beliefs, determine whether they can be deduced from axioms, are logically consistent with other beliefs, etc. Scientists, however, should be concerned with such matters, and since this essay is interested in political science, I do not pursue this issue further.

Thus, should you choose to read further in this literature, please understand that different scholars may use different terms and identify different schools of thought.

2 Classical Ontology

The allegory of the cave, described above, gives some insight into Plato's ontological position, and his views can be seen as representative of classical beliefs. Plato put forward a theory of forms. He argued that everything on earth approximated the perfection of its form. For example, if we were to consider the problem of how we come to know that a table is a table (as opposed to, say, a chair or a bench), the theory of forms suggests that a terrestrial object is a table to the extent that it approximates the form of a table. That is, the properties of the form cause the object to be a table (if this sounds odd, that is not surprising, because most students today find classical ontology odd—it is rather different from modern ontology as we will see in the next section). A major task of philosophy, then, is to come to know the nature of the forms.

If we return to Plato's allegory of the cave, we might be able to illustrate this. In that story, the forms would be the world above the cave, the philosopher would be the one able to observe the puppets, and the average person would be the prisoner. The classical account of ontology held that humans could not know the forms directly (one can think of this as an imperfection of human perception). However, Plato argued that philosophy (or, if you prefer, reason or logic) could lead one to develop a better understanding of the forms than simply relying on perception alone. Hence, a philosophical (or, if you prefer, scholarly) life is superior to a non-philosophical life.

The classical view of ontology has not been taken seriously for thousands of years. I discuss it briefly to provide a point of comparison for the modern and postmodern ontological positions, each of which is today taken seriously by different scholars.

3 Modern Ontology

In its strongest form the modern view is likely to be more consistent with your own ontological beliefs (we all have them even if we do not recognize them by such a name as 'ontological beliefs'). The modern view developed in part as a reaction to the growing belief in the infallibility of human perception. Whereas classical philosophers viewed human perception as imperfect,

modern philosophers hold the position that human perception (especially our five senses) is not flawed. This view developed during the enlightenment as European philosophers began to elevate their opinion of humankind in comparison to God.

The modern view holds that observation is not problematic. That is, if we want to find truth, we can simply observe it. Recall that classical beliefs about ontology required logic or reason, and even that in combination with observation was imperfect. The extreme modern view is that observation (or, if you prefer, induction) provides a gateway to truth in the world. By this view, observation is not problematic—we can trust our senses. This view holds that there is a particular world out there and that people can simply observe it.

The most widely held contemporary modern philosophy of science is known as scientific realism (Putnam 1985). Scientific realism holds the view that there is a real (or True) world out there and that humans may come to know it via science. That is, human perception is not inevitably fallible, nor is it the case that humans impose meaning on the world (as the postmodern position—discussed below—holds). Thus, the concepts in scientific theories (e.g., atoms or neutrons) refer to real things that exist in the world—they are not merely shadows of forms (as classical ontology holds), nor human inventions that are merely useful, as postmodern pragmatists (discussed below) hold.

4 Postmodern Ontology

If you are familiar with the term ‘politically correct,’ then you are at least somewhat acquainted with postmodern philosophy as that term grew out of the postmodern revolution. The postmodern ontological position was developed in reaction to the modern position. It holds that humans create understandings of the world, and that different humans create different understandings of the world. Postmodern thinkers are bothered by the implication of modern ontology that since there is one world out there, and observation is not problematic, then there is only one reasonable interpretation of the world. The postmodern philosopher counters that while there may in fact be only one ‘true’ world out there, there are many reasonable, but distinct interpretations (or understandings) of that world. Many of today’s students find this argument appealing.

Some scholars who hold a postmodern view of ontology argue that the dominant theories of the world are dominant not because they are true

(as one who subscribes to a modern ontological position would argue), but because those who subscribe to the dominant view are more powerful than others. Other postmodern scholars focus their attention on the question of determining what theories are superior.

The pragmatist school of postmodernity holds that human beings create theories which are composed of concepts that are not real and assumptions that are not realistic. There may or may not be a real world out there (as modernists contend), but it does not matter whether there is. What matters is whether we have theories that help us act in the world. The pragmatist school, then, is interested in heuristics, not Truth: if a theory helps human beings act in the world, then it is useful, and it is not important whether the theory describes a real world.³

To recapitulate, one can identify three schools of thought that address our ability to know what is. The classical school argued that human perception was flawed and that philosophy could help one overcome, but not eliminate the frailties of human perception. The modern school rejected the frailties of human perception and argued that the truth of the world could be discerned directly through observation. The postmodern school rejected the modern approach, instead arguing that humans impose their understandings on the world. All three approaches are interested in understanding the world. The different schools suggest somewhat different criteria for evaluating theories. The criteria we should use to evaluate theory are discussed in a separate paper (Moore 2001). However, before turning to that discussion, I briefly introduce a further complication: whether we should view our efforts to understand the political world as a search for truth or a search for useful (or heuristic) theories.

5 Truth v. Heuristics: The Purpose of Theory

I take the position that the purpose of theory⁴ is heuristic explanation. That is, theories are not expected to reveal Truth. By this view, the search for Truth is presumed to be the purview of theology, philosophy, or some other enterprise, but it is not the objective of science. A rival position is that scientists propose theories in search of truth. That is, the purpose of engaging in science is to reveal the ‘true nature of reality.’

³The strong postmodern-pragmatist position holds that it is not possible to describe the real world.

⁴The reader might wonder how I define theory. The definition is presented in Moore (2001).

The distinction between these positions overlaps somewhat with the distinction between modern and postmodern ontological positions. That is, scientists subscribing to the modern position must assume that there is one ‘true’ model of any given political process, and that it is knowable via observation. Some scholars subscribing to a postmodern view, however, would reject the view that there is a single, ‘true’ model of a given political process, and would argue that there are close to an infinite (and in any case, more than any one person can imagine) number of rival models of any given political process.

Regardless of the ontological view to which one subscribes, I suspect the reader will agree that it is important to establish criteria over which we should evaluate rival theories, models, or explanations (I am using these terms loosely and interchangeably—they are defined elsewhere). That is, someone holding the modern position cannot simply assert that direct observation is sufficient for discerning the truth about the world because different people may disagree about what it is they observe (i.e., they may produce different explanations about why a candidate won an election, etc.). Similarly, someone subscribing to a postmodern view needs to negotiate the slippery slope of extreme relativism (i.e., the position that all explanations are equally useful). Thus, scholars advocating either the modern or the postmodern ontological position must develop some criteria over which to judge the merits of any given explanation. I identify several useful criteria in a separate paper (Moore 2001). Here I wish to briefly take issue with the inductivist argument of Francis Bacon, who put forward a method of inquiry from a modern ontological position. In doing so, I hope to illuminate some of the value of combining the postmodern position with a heuristic approach to theory.

Bacon argued that it was possible to discern the truth about the world by simply collecting evidence about events, and looking at the evidence carefully to identify the causal patterns among the data. His approach is often called Baconian induction, and it is routinely criticized because it contends that theory (or deduction) is not necessary. Criticisms against Baconian induction can be developed in several ways. A common critique from a postmodern ontological position is that humans do not simply observe the world from a neutral position. That is, different people’s past experiences, beliefs, theories about the world, etc. lead them to identify different factors as being important to a given outcome even though they are observing the same thing. Put differently, observation is theory dependent. Perhaps a concrete example will help.

Imagine that three people observe a mayoral election in their town.

Imagine further that the first person believes that the most important criterion for electing a mayor is integrity. Imagine that the second person believes that the most important criterion for electing a mayor is the ability to attract new businesses to the area. Imagine that the third person believes that it does not matter who wins, and that the candidate with the largest campaign budget will win. Imagine further that each person believes that most people think like s/he does. The imaginary election is held, and the winner is the former head of the local Chamber of Commerce. She has a squeaky clean reputation that was not sullied during the campaign, and she raised more money than her challenger. I submit that in such a circumstance, each of our three people will believe that her/his theory of politics was vindicated by the election. For our purposes the story is useful because it suggests that what someone observes can be influenced by the beliefs that person holds about how the world works: observation is theory dependent.

Why is observation theory dependent? Consider the problem of complete description. It is impossible to describe any situation completely. As an exercise, describe what is happening as you read this sentence. Where would you bound the description? Would it only include what is happening in your view? Would it include events at the sub-atomic level? You can hopefully see that these questions can go on indefinitely.

The problem of complete description ensures that we cannot describe the “real world.” People cannot, as Bacon argued, observe the world and determine the causal patterns that make the world the way that it is because to do so would require that we are able to describe the world completely. Given the problem of complete description, most scientists take the view that our beliefs or models are, by definition, abstractions (or simplified, incomplete accounts) that emphasize what we believe to be the most important causal factors that account for a phenomenon in which we have interest. If one accepts this argument, then it is not possible that any theory or model is True—theories are, by definition, incomplete descriptions of the world. Those who accept these arguments contend that the purpose of constructing theories, then, is to find useful ones. The purpose is not to find the True theory, but a better theory than existing ones.

The views sketched in the preceding paragraph are consistent with post-modern ontology and at odds with modern ontology because they suggest that people are not simply observing the world, but instead imposing their views on the world. That is, the theories and models that human beings create are not descriptions of the world, but instead are the creation of human cognition and thus have no meaningful existence except among humans. Presumably, the world would exist if humans became extinct. However, hu-

man theories and models would expire with the species. That is, the world exists independently of human cognition. Further, our theories and models of the world only exist because of our ability to think. They cannot be True (or False), they can only be helpful (or unhelpful), and their heuristic value is an inherently comparative quality (i.e., we must ask: ‘More or less useful than what?’).

6 Who Cares?

Why should someone planning a research and teaching career in political science care about such matters? I submit that they are important because they have ramifications for the criteria one selects to guide one’s research. That is, all scholars must ask how they will determine whether their ideas (or theories or models) are any good and whether they should share them with their colleagues and students. Some might answer that the scientific method identifies a set of criteria by which one can adequately judge theory. Many political scientists would concur. Yet, what exactly is the scientific method?

I leave discussion of that issue for another paper. I wrote this paper to persuade you that making a knowledge claim (i.e., coming to know something useful about politics) is not trivial. As undergraduates you probably learned to make knowledge claims by memorizing the knowledge claims of others. Your graduate education will require this as well. However, the pursuit of a successful scholarly career requires that one become a producer of knowledge claims, not simply a consumer of them. Political scientists are expected to conduct their own research and make claims about politics. Before you can do so you must first develop a set of criteria over which you can evaluate knowledge claims (or theories). And the selection of those criteria is partly driven by one’s ontological beliefs. I submit that it is better to critically evaluate one’s beliefs than to leave them unexamined.

By way of conclusion, I have identified three schools of thought on ontology, and while my discussion is cursory, it is hopefully useful. The library contains a wealth of material for those interested in a more nuanced understanding of these issues. Most political scientists, however, leave these debates to the philosophers.⁵ I contend that we will become a better discipline if we invest some thought in these issues and make conscious decisions about our ontological beliefs and our position on the search for Truth versus the search for more useful theories.

⁵But see Wendt (1999) for an important exception

References

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