

Review of: "An Ontological Turn for Psychology in the age of the Machine and Global Warming"

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I cannot deny that reading Sundararajan's call for an ontological turn in psychology made me happy not only because of the compelling arguments, but also because of the critical effect inherent in decolonial perspectives on all areas of science. Although, in my opinion, the results presented by the works stamped with the seal of decolonials are usually unconvincing attempts to express some independence and, consequently, epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2007), perhaps due to lack of creativity or persuasive force, this is definitely not the case of Sundararajan's paper. Speaking more specifically, Sundararajan argues for a shift in orientation from an "ontology of objects" to an "ontology of subjects". What does this mean? The first categorization means the way in which the Western worldview regulates which basic pieces of the world should or should not count, and how, in the production of an alleged valid knowledge, in general directing the point of attention to objects artificially atomized and transformed into countable elements, perfectly suited to referencing through logical variables, while the latter tries to convey the recognition of the central role of subjective interpretations, moral values and the reality of the culturally different other, approaches usually relegated to disregard and erasure by what the author calls in her paper "Mainstream Psychology". In contrast to scientific approaches that subrogate a position of scientific neutrality, the essayist presents the work of Jessica Hernandez (2022) on indigenous science, and her own work with other authors (Thong et al., 2023) on ecological grief, as forms of conceptualization that take seriously into account the meanings of community and existence of the populations involved in these studies. These are knowledge production practices that are constitutively open to the incorporation of differences, as opposed to the abstractionist disposition of Western epistemology in general, exclusively informed by a logic provided by the principles of identity, non-contradiction and excluded middle, which unconditionally compels the postulation of countable objects.

Sundararajan's call for an ontological conversion is not made without advantages being presented as correlated to this new epistemic coalition, whose impact would bring out profound benefits for the planet. Mainly in terms of dealing with, I presume, the effects of global warming through some sort of preservation of, or at least of a respectful relationship with, the ways of life of native peoples and their advantageous interactions with the environment. On the other hand, naturally, adherence to an ontology of objects, or, more properly, to an ontology that defines reality in terms of objective knowledge of nature, according to the aforementioned logic, carries with it a series of systemic unethical consequences such as the loss of human perspective, moral vacuum, elimination of researchers' judgement, neutral-value reductionism, lack of a critical evaluation of some deleterious effects for the cultures involved in the scientific work, transformation of human

interests into merely raw data, all according to what is mentioned in Sundararajan's article.

There are, however, two interrelated questions that I would like to make to Dr. Sandararajan for further clarification, which naturally result from the philosophical complexity involved in her use of the word "ontology", even if it is circumscribed to "human's basic commitments and assumptions". Let me see if I can make myself clear. Perhaps ontology is an older discipline than philosophy itself, since it is known that several pre-Socratic thinkers, still in a field where mythology could not be clearly separated from academic philosophy in the Western world, dedicated themselves to the understanding of the fundamental composition of the cosmos. Xenophones, Anaximander, Parmenides, Thales, and many others, each of them in their own way, tried to discover the primal substance of which the universe was essentially composed. Therefore, it is not without a great deal of irony that Heidegger in 1927, about 2,500 years after that time, wanted to literally destroy the metaphysics that for millennia accompanied terms such as "subject", "object", "space", "time", "human being", "body", "matter", "logic", "history", etc. Heidegger advanced in his most famous and incomplete book, "Being and Time" (1962), a fundamental ontology that consists, paradoxically, in an analytic phenomenology of the only entity in the world that asks itself about "the meaning of being". In other words, ontology became, in Heidegger's hands, only a matter of actions and choices of this particular entity (which he called *Dasein*) that is crucially concerned with the meaning of being. So that ontology became in 1927 just an analytic of the existence of *Dasein*. Thus, if Sundararajan says that ontology refers to "human's basic commitments and assumptions" and their consequences, she should not be far from some phenomenological analytics of existence.

So, here is my first question. This is not the first time I bump into the expression "ontological commitments". This phrase circulates in the philosophical literature since about 1960, with the publication of a text from Quine entitled "On what there is" (1961). The word "commitment" in this text was used only to mean the kind of assumption to which a conceptual scheme of a theory is linked to. In Quine's view, the furniture of the universe could only be given within the scope of human experience, even the most commonplaces ones. So that the role of a conceptual scheme was to describe, as accurately as possible, the data of such experience encapsulated by some paradigmatic orientation regarding the fundamental conformation of the universe. Through such descriptions we should have to determine, for example, if Pegasus, the winged horse, was a real or imaginary experience. It is clear for Quine that within a conceptual scheme "to be is to be the value of a variable" (p. 15). The problem is that, even restricted to sense data, armed with the strictest method of a conceptual scheme, we cannot adjudicate between the different ontologies that guide such conceptions. The most we will be able to determine is whether the data is empirically adequate or not to the conceptual scheme in focus. But this, in its turn, may be the conceptual scheme of a realistic, formalist or nominalist inclination, ontologies upon which we cannot simply decide. Regardless of the most severe criticisms that can be made to the conceptual scheme/empirical content dualism proposed by Quine in his text (Davidson (1991) even qualified his endeavor as "the third dogma of empiricism"), my first question is how it would be possible to decide between an ontology of objects and another of subjects? Would the moral appeal, or the threat of a global collapse, be enough for a change of attitude?

The second question is about what really means "ontology" in her paper, beyond "human's basic commitments". Is it a nominal container for actions and choices, like Heidegger's, or is it a metaphysical surrogate of the ancient pre-philosophical writings? I note that for two of the authors mentioned by Sundararajan, Heywood (2017) and Viveiros de

Castro (1998), “ontology” is almost a synonym for “nature” within a particular dichotomy that the latter does with the word “culture”, and that both explicitly reject. Thus, their “ontological turns”, as it were, are nothing more than forms of transformation of the world through a metaphysical resource. They never mention the expression “ontology of subjects” or its counterpart “ontology of objects”. Viveiros de Castro even says that his “multinaturalism” is a sort of “cosmic politics” (p. 472). The two are much closer to Heidegger, or perhaps more properly to Deleuze or Latour, in my view, than to the use of the word “ontology” in the traditional sense. So, I wonder if this is also the guidance of this word in the Sundararajan’s article.

In addition, I want to present my compliments to the author for the relevant discussion.

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