

## Psychology and ontology: foundations for a critical reflection on the production of knowledge

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**Abstract:** We discuss scientific practice in psychology and present theoretical elements that allow an ontological critique of this field. We argue that the production of knowledge in psychology lacks an ontological conception of society, human action and the production of knowledge, relegating investigation and debate about the very nature of the object that science examines. We conclude by stating that this position results in further differences between the different schools of psychology, notably of object and method, and that a deeper analysis is needed in order to uncover the conception of human being underlying the different schools, criticizing it in view of the concrete subject that is dealt with in different social contexts.

**Keywords:** science, ontology, psychology.

### Introduction

Human reality is a historical, dynamic and articulated totality, in which the field of production of knowledge is closely related to the dynamics of society and its historical periods. As a complex articulated to the social totality, and understood as a modality of *praxis*, it is intrinsic of science to reflect on assumptions, procedures, results, uses, in such a way that it proves impossible to dissociate Philosophy from Science, the former without the latter. The very denial of such an imbrication “constitutes a certain philosophical-methodological stance” (Shuare, 2017, p. 21).

In this sense, we see as a central problem in the debate on the production of knowledge in psychology the lack of an ontological conception of society, human action and the production of knowledge, or even the concealment of such foundations as are found in the various theoretical-methodological branches under the notion of a negation of ontology. We also understand that antiontologism and the veto of criticism of the foundations, even in positions that purport to be counter-hegemonic, are one of the forms of identification of the scientific project of psychology by replicating the capitalist order.

Here, we question scientific practice in the field of psychology by starting with a reflection on the historical soil in which it develops as an area of science, a period described as “decline of ideology” of bourgeois thought (Lukács, 2018), analyzing some developments for the Constitution of its fundamental onto-epistemological tendencies, and we expose some theoretical elements that enable an ontological critique of this field.

### Psychology and ideological decline: hegemony and epistemological plurality

Psychology is known for its theoretical and, hence, epistemological plurality. The recognition of such plurality entails the diagnosis of a “permanent crisis” in this area (Cornejo, 2005). The main implication of such a diagnosis in psychology, or even in the Social Sciences, would be the emergence of new paradigms (or the contemporary notion of paradigms in the Social Sciences), beliefs about the world and about knowledge, which only admit criticism in their own terms and never by other beliefs/paradigms. We understand that the apology of a kind of “non-aggression pact” and non-critical acceptance of the epistemological multiplicity, which is current situation of the production of knowledge, not only in psychology, blocks precisely the critical and, therefore, emancipatory potential of science.

However, at the same time that criticism of one paradigm by another is blocked because they are different “languages”, it becomes evident that the only possibility of confrontation would be in ontological terms, that is, confronting the way in which different paradigms represent and conceive the world (Duayer, 2015). Because every theoretical-methodological proposal has a figuration of the world that sustains it, even when they claim to be antiontological (Lacerda, 2010), the critical analysis of the foundations is presented as a core question for the Social Sciences.

We consider, therefore, that criticism is not only possible, but crucial: it is the way of knowing for the Social Sciences. And criticism, in this sense, is ontological criticism (Duayer, 2016), which for now we will define as criticism of the figurations of the world that lie at the foundation of each paradigm or theory.

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In the history of psychology, according to the systematizations made by Figueiredo (2008), and Cornejo (2005), if on the one hand there is the consolidation of a hegemonic model of science referenced in the Natural Sciences and their methods, on the other there are alternative proposals that form a paradigm kaleidoscope whose main purpose, based on different ways of understanding the object, is to confront the boundaries that the positivist influence imposes on the understanding of the human being. If traditions influenced by positivism deny ontological reflection with the justification of searching for empirically accessible laws governing human behavior, the current attitude in hermeneutic-comprehensive traditions (Cornejo, 2005) is that knowledge about the world cannot be objective since it would always be described from a point of view (personal-experiential, theoretical, class, cultural, ethnic) (Duayer, 2016).

The lack of ontological reflection lies at the origin of the scientific project of psychology developed by Wundt (Araújo, 2007). He applied to this endeavor the theses of his theory of knowledge, based on Kant, therefore with an empiricist, gnosiological and antiontological bias, as an evident attempt to exclude from this discipline of science the knowledge produced by philosophical speculation.

To critically situate both the Wundtian enterprise and – and above all – the later paths of psychology as a science, we use the interpretation of Lacerda (2010), for whom the characteristics that psychology assumes as a science, and the very emergence of a project of psychology as a scientific discipline, derive from what Lukács (2018) called the period of “decline of ideology” of the bourgeoisie. That is, psychology is one expression, among many, of the transition of the bourgeoisie from being a revolutionary class to a class that, after prevailing over the feudal aristocracy, becomes the dominant class whose main threat is the working class, of which the definitive milestone are the revolutions of 1848.

In this transit, in terms of theoretical reflection, the bourgeoisie ceases to be interested in a deep investigation of reality and its contradictions, and to take the world under the rule of reason. The key characteristic of the decline of ideology is the apology of the reality instituted by the capitalist order. Its function is “to ensure social reproduction of the current order and to reduce the contribution of knowledge to an intensification of the process of valorization of capital” (Lacerda, 2010, p. 65).

According to Coutinho (2010), there are two basic forms of manifestation of such decadence: agnosticism and irrationalism. The core determination of agnostic rationalism is that, at certain stages of the development of capitalism, there is a feeling of security and stability resulting from the development of productive forces. As an expression thereof, reason is limited, bureaucratized, and scientific enterprise becomes the formulation of universal

and immutable laws, supported by formal methodological rules and based on compartmentalized sciences, which break down the totality of reality and reduce themselves to a manipulation of apparent reality. Phenomena become devoid of contradictions, which are the conditions of historical genesis and their social essence. Positivism, neo-positivism and structuralism are distinct expressions of that agnosticism, of the “of the poorness of reason” (Coutinho, 2010; Lacerda, 2010).

In turn, irrationalism is determined by the contexts of crisis of capitalism and by the spreading of a feeling of anguish, pessimism and skepticism about reality and the possibilities of apprehending it rationally and transforming it consciously (Coutinho, 2010; Lukács, 2020). Hence conceptions averse to the cognoscibility of the real and to reason itself. Irrationalism turns against social reality and against agnostic rationalism, but it does so by finding in Intuition the only source of knowledge, which results in subjectivism, particularism and a romantic criticism of the order, which in turn results in a form of indirect apology of that same order. It is in this sense that Lukács (2020) asserts that “there is no innocent world view” (p. 10), whether or not its author is aware of the apologetic effects of his conceptions. He also asserts that one should not judge the intention of a theoretician, but “the objectified expression of thought and its historically necessary effectiveness”.

Psychology, as a science, is precisely an expression of the paths of the decline of ideology (Lacerda, 2010), at least in the terms that predominated in its constitution and development. From the middle of the nineteenth century, the impulses of a field of rational reflection on human self-activity, on the nature of the human being responsible for building his own history, which had been present throughout the revolutionary period of the bourgeoisie, give way to a partial science focused on controlling the human being with the goal of maintaining the established social order and in tune with the interests of the new ruling class.

This question is already expressed in Wundt’s project, but the definitive statement of the specific field and its apologetic character is given through the appropriation on American soil of this incipient science, when psychology needed to respond to technicist needs, to the demands for a useful science and the scientific requirements that could ensure its status as an independent science. Concerning quantification, psychology achieved the status as a science and, despite all the plurality of the field, it developed a hegemonic line in which behaviorism is the first mature expression of agnosticism: “Technicism replaced theory as the ultimate criterion for judging the value and acceptability of psychological research” (Lacerda, 2010, p. 144).

On the other hand, this period also solidifies irrationalist tendencies born in a crisis-stricken Europe. Such tendencies will influence psychology

and attempt to antagonize this hegemonic project, but they do so by establishing equally antiontological projects, whether influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy, phenomenology, existentialism, among others. Finally, whether by the path of agnosticism or by irrationalism, the epistemological plurality of psychology keeps its distance from ontology, from the investigation of the foundations of human reality under the bourgeois social order and, in a triumphalist or pessimistic way, by objectivist formalism or by various forms of subjectivism. In the end, it creates forms of knowledge production that capitulate to capitalist sociability.

As a result, psychology was established and developed as a complex of intellectual orientations often contradictory to each other, and the differences that shape them are never analyzed and questioned in their foundations. We understand that scientific interpretation is a form of activity of the social human being and that, therefore, scientific knowledge is a type of work, an expression of the relationship between the human being and nature embodied in history (Vygotski, 2013). Hence, we consider that the possibility of debate and confrontation of conceptions should happen through an exposition of their historical conditions.

In other words, we understand that it is possible and necessary to head toward awareness, to use a term that Martin-Baró (1986/2011) borrowed from Freire, about which, the why and the what-for of different perspectives of building knowledge and practice in/of psychology. In this sense, we present the parameters based on which we propose the debate. Our analysis follows the established paths in the area and our specific focus is on ontology and ontological criticism.

In this direction, the discussion that we propose is centered on the *social being* (the proper way for humans beings to be). By analyzing this specific way of being, we intend to demonstrate that the negation of ontology is a characteristic that unites positivism to several branches of epistemology that attempt to criticize/overcome it.

## Ontology of the social being and scientific praxis

Our starting point is precisely the consideration of what is taken to be the object of psychology, the human being. For this moment of the text, we are specifically interested in the implications that the conception of the human being may have for the issue of *knowing*.

We start from the formulation by Marx and Engels (2007) that the "first assumption of all human existence and, therefore, also of all history" is "the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history" [is that] "men must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history'". In other words, if human beings need to survive and thrive in order to, for

instance, develop language, then first of all the need to produce the means to satisfy the needs that ensure their survival. Therefore, the other areas of human life have as a necessary condition that human beings transform nature to produce the conditions for their reproduction as human beings, that is, they are conditioned to work<sup>1</sup>.

The transformation of nature requires that human beings articulate themselves collectively, in social relations of production, which implies consciousness and language. For this reason, there is an ontological priority of work over other human traits, which does not translate into chronological terms (what came first?), but only into the fact that these traits assume that in order to exist, "all other categories of this way of being already have, in essence, a purely social character" (Lukács, 2013, p. 43).

More important than that is the fact that work is what allows human beings to take a quality leap in comparison to the preceding form of (biological) being, without ever separating completely from it; from then, the characteristics of this being are defined in the articulation of historical processes, shifting away from natural barriers. Thus, we must look more closely at the specificities of this being and the developments – always historical – of these specificities.

Throughout this process that constitutes human action ontologically, the subject needs to investigate the appropriate means of achieving the purpose established/set. A condition of such an investigation is an "objective knowledge of how to bring about those objectivities and processes which have to be set in motion in order to realize this goal" (Lukács, 1980, p. 54). It is necessary to discover the legalities, properties, connections that govern the objects that the subject examines, and also new possibilities of connection and combination present in them. Such forms, if put into effect in the action of the subject, lead to the purpose being achieved.

Since the objects of the world operate with absolute indifference to the needs of humans, it is the working subject who takes these objects and their characteristics from his point of view and his needs; it is the subject who sees on a stone the possibility of a knife (nature has no purpose). Yet, the subject cannot do something which is beyond the possibilities of the object; he needs to discover the characteristics of the object that allow him to make it into an instrument. By doing so, by transforming the causalities specific to the elements of nature into causality set (that is, subjected to the needs of the purpose), he can carry out the work.

1 In this sense, this work is presented in its founding, ontological character, yet without any specific historical forms under which it takes shape. For example, we do not speak of work under capitalist relations of production (paid and alienated work); these relations transform the ability of the human being to produce goods meant to satisfy needs into merchandise.

It is important to highlight that work is the standard for all social practice. The well-known phrase of Marx (2001) in *The 18th of Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* for whom “men make their own history; yet they do not make it as they please, they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already” (p. 25), can help us provide a more robust picture of this practice. Marx is treating society as the object of human action, stressing that this action is limited by the conditions imposed by the object on which human beings act, in this case society at a given historical moment. A limitation that is not absolute, which opens up a field of possibilities to transform the object into something different from what it is at present; but the possibilities are not endless and independent from the object’s properties – historically contextualized society –, which should ward off voluntarist intentions.

In his turn, Lukács (2013) draws attention to two heterogeneous, but inseparable, processes that are essential for fulfilling the purpose set. One of them, already mentioned, is to articulate the causal chains according to the established need (e.g. transforming properties of the stone into a property suitable to the satisfaction of the need, honing until it is sharp enough to become the edge of an ax and split a coconut). The other process, which is a condition for establishing the causal chains, is mirroring reality in the most correct way possible. This need shows a separation between objects of reality – which exist regardless of subjects – and the subjects, who need to represent that reality in their consciousness as a condition for their teleological action. If it were impossible to reproduce reality in consciousness, it would not be possible to achieve the set goals, the foundation of work and of all human praxis (Lukács, 2013).

One cannot, however, absolutize the action of consciousness, as if it passively reproduced a perfect copy of what is reality in itself, which shows the need for increasingly accurate instruments for understanding objects. Even when it comes to imperfect and even incorrect degrees of knowledge to some extent, they can guarantee the fulfillment of the set goal. In addition, mirroring is always subjected to, and guided by, the purpose, which means that not all the intensive properties of the object need to be discovered. Therefore, the separation between subject and object is central to human activity.

In this sense, ideas are needed – and can be of various kinds – about what the world is, in order to act on it. Lukács (2013) called the collection of those images “ontology of everyday life”, precisely because they are useful to us in the immediate practice. However, the complexification of society makes human practice more and more mediated, in a way that widens the gap between practice and the structures on which we act. As a result, notions which are useful in one moment can lose their function of manipulating the immediate reality in the next,

allowing such notions to become increasingly false, partial, and requiring more refined formulations by philosophy and science (Medeiros, 2013). It should be noted that science itself can, due to social-historical determinations, be relegated to an instrumental, manipulative character, never going beyond that character (Medeiros, 2013), as in the case of agnostic formalism.

What the ontological analysis of work teaches us is that the separation between reality and consciousness allows the search for its properties, connections etc. to guide the acting on itself, so that consciousness presents itself at the start and at the end of the process. Broadening this understanding – through science – dilates the practical horizon, increasing dominance over reality and the extent of human freedom (its possibility of conscious choices). “This capacity of science to confer on human beings a broader dominion over the world, natural and social, is in itself its emancipatory content” (Medeiros, 2013, p. 101).

It is not a question of subscribing to everything that is done in the name of science, nor of asserting the absolute character of its discoveries, but we cannot deny the possibilities of domination of reality created, for example, by the Copernican revolution or Darwin’s theory of evolution. To actualize such content, science must be guided by the *truth*, which can only be the truth of the object. That is, given that the possibility of human action lies in the investigation of reality, the truth cannot be relative to the knowing subjects, but only to reality itself. In this sense, it is necessary both to discard the possibility of absolute truth – final, immutable and unquestionable – and relativistic – that truth is a matter of perspective of the subject or group that looks at reality.

Considering the ontological reflections made so far, in the next section we will discuss their implications for the Social Sciences and resume the question of the truth and the emancipatory character of science, further elaborating on the argument.

## The social as a scientific object

We already drew attention to the range of the famous passage from *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in which Marx points out the condition posed by history for human action. Now, we must look deeper into the question of human action that takes society as its object. This imbroglio, which has followed the Social Sciences – including psychology – since its birth, can be summarized in a few questions: how to research ourselves? Is it possible to observe and be observed at the same time? Is an objective knowledge of a reality produced by ourselves possible?

We showed previously that the world precedes human action and is its condition of possibility, which also applies to the social world. According to Bhaskar

(1998), our consciousness cannot determine the structure of the world; rather, “it is the nature of objects that determines their cognitive possibilities for us” (p. 206) – which does not mean passive consciousness, as previously stressed.

From this argument, we infer the need for relative autonomy of social structures regarding the subjects, so that all action is possible. That is, since human action cannot start from nothing, it presupposes physical and social structures, just as speech presupposes language, acting as a father/mother presupposes the family social structure, working presupposes social relations of production specific to an era, and so on. Society is not a set of phenomena that we access through the senses, but a set of relationships – structures or mechanisms – and relationships between these relationships, besides the phenomena that emerge from these relationships (Bhaskar, 1998), a complex of complexes (Lukács, 2013).

Bhaskar (1998) postulates that society (its structures) is always already made, presupposed in action (just as in the relationship with the natural world, the objects of reality precede the action on them), and human praxis can only modify it. However, and this is a crucial aspect, the totality of individual acts is what maintains or transforms reality. However, and this is a crucial aspect, the totality of individual acts is what maintains or transforms reality.

Thus, we can argue that the social structures are relatively autonomous in relation to human action, even if they cannot forego it, a situation that leads Bhaskar (1998) to assert an ontological specificity of the social. Since, as was pointed out, human action is conscious and originates from choices between alternatives, it follows that “by *restricting* and *enabling* human acts, society acts on the achievement of teleological positions, conditioning them . . . it is correct to state that social structures impose limits and establish the possibilities open to human action” (Medeiros, 2013, p. 54). This does not mean that it is possible to fully understand the single individual actions by knowing the structures; instead, it means that without knowing the mediations (of the structures), we do not understand what happens at the single-act level.

In summary, considering purpose in this paper, if human activity is work on objects that exist prior to the activity itself, society is, thus, the object on which we act – and thus we socialize. Consistent with the reflection undertaken so far, to act on it we need to conceive it in somehow, so that all the elements pertinent to the relationship between subject and object – mirroring, alternative choice – are equally valid for the case of the action of the subjects on the social world, which provides for a science about society.

## Antiontologism, antirealism and ontological criticism

Having demonstrated that a science of society is possible, we can now face the epistemological questions often raised when approaching the complexity of this object. Finally, we can show how the ontological analysis allows us to overcome the obstacles. This is because throughout the development of modern sciences, most epistemological traditions, precisely as an expression of the “decline of ideology”, followed an antiontological trend (Lukács, 2012).

Given the understanding that everything that does not concern the empirical dimension is nothing but metaphysics, positivism (and the so-called post-positivism) flattens reality, translating what Bhaskar (1998) calls *empirical realism*. Under these conditions, scientific practice is reduced to a generalized manipulation of immediate (empirical) reality. From the positivist point of view, the way in which the data about human reality are presented at a given moment is “entified” as what reality really is, thus moving away from the dynamic character of the real – guaranteed by the fact of its historicity and its transempirical structures. The role of science, therefore, would be to identify patterns of connections between events and elaborate explanatory models, abstractions, that correspond to reality as such.

In turn, the conceptions of scientific activity that sought to confront or surmount the limits of positivism, for the most part, did so by a relativistic path (admittedly to different degrees) that ultimately results in an empirical ontology (Duayer, 2016). “Wholesale relativism” (Duayer, 2015) includes both postmodern, poststructuralist, and neo-pragmatic traditions as well as the philosophies of science by Thomas Kuhn (1998), Imre Lakatos, and Paul Feyerabend (to name only the most well-known).

Although it is not the objective of this paper to analyze each of the concepts presented, we underscore that the common element between them is that they consider that knowledge about the world can never be objective, as it always starts from a point of view, some form of local consensus – of a scientific, class, cultural, geographical, ethnic group, etc. (Duayer, 2015). It is a typical position of irrationalism (Lukács, 2020). Therefore, such conceptions implicitly end up secreting an empiricist ontology, since the world becomes what subjects or social groups perceive – and, to immediate perception, the empirical world is what appears.

The criticism of positivism formulated by the conceptions about scientific activity we referred to question its assumption that scientific knowledge is neutral and, therefore, true. However, by pointing out the relativity of our beliefs, including scientific ones, they follow a path in which they end up equating the various

types of beliefs in all of their terms. In this sense, any theoretical formulations aimed at overcoming the immediate reality that they reflect, that aim at being true for relationships other than the immediate context, are quickly accused of being totalizing and, in a worrying and recurrent logical explanation, totalitarian (Duayer, 2015). This is what is at stake in the “fight against great narratives” in vogue.

It should be noted that the problem in relativism is not exactly in the – correct – assumption that knowledge is historical. Indeed, some traditions try to historicize human activity and knowledge, but they do so without an ontological basis, so they fall into an *epistemic fallacy* (Bhaskar, 2008). Considering the transient and social character of knowledge, they deny the reality of the object as independent from the subject who knows it, they assume “that ontological questions can always be transposed into epistemological terms” (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 29).

This is the position that has sustained *anthropocentrism* in the philosophy of science (Bhaskar, 2008), placing the subject of knowledge at the center of the process, moving aside the very reality about which the subject needs to inquire. In line with what we analyzed about human work and its relationship with the reflection on the world (both mirroring and alternative choice), Collier (1994) asserts that “knowledge exists as an aspect of our being in the world, and before we can know how we know, we need to have some idea how we interact with that world in such a way as to acquire knowledge of it” (p. 137).

Anthropocentrism leads to the deduction of an ontological relativism based on epistemological relativism. Since reality would not exist unattached from knowledge of it, all ontologies (figurations of reality) are comparable. Therefore, as pointed out at the beginning of this text, they cannot be compared or criticized by operating a “judgmental relativism” (Duayer, 2015).

One of the central ideas of this antiontologism and, we can now say, antirealism is the fear of the word essence (ontology). In confronting metaphysics, several traditions have denied any possibilities of thinking about the foundation of the phenomena. Let us look at a precious excerpt by Foucault on such a procedure:

If the genealogist is cautious enough to listen to history instead of believing in metaphysics, what does he learn? That behind things there is, “something entirely different”: not their essential and undated secret, but *the secret that they are without an essence*, or that their essence was built piece by piece out of figures that were unfamiliar to them. (Foucault, 1978, p. 18, highlighted by the author)

In this understanding, all ontology is, as in positivism, relegated to the condition of pure metaphysics, in this case as a moral artifice. For the author, or behind things, there is no essence or “someone” built such an essence, for the essence itself does not belong to the thing; it is “strange” to it.

In a diverging position, we argue that an ontological conception which attempts to go beyond immediate reality is not only possible, but is a condition for science. “All science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided”, Marx (2017, p. 880) thus summarizes when he shows that vulgar economy – born in his day and dominant today – “does no more than interpret, systematize and defend in doctrinaire fashion the conceptions of the agents of bourgeois production who are entrapped in bourgeois production relations” (p. 880).

What science should make possible is to go through the veil that hides its structures, even if essence ought not to be conceived as the truth hidden behind the veil of the phenomenal lying sphere, as Foucault’s commentary suggests. Essence can only be conceived here if articulated to its phenomenal manifestations, as true as itself, and by a greater permanence in relation to the manifest phenomena (for example, the family structure exists, even if certain single families cease to exist phenomenally).

In an even more aggressive investment toward relativism, any possibility of objective knowledge and, consequently, of true knowledge is denied. In this sense, as the knowledge about reality itself is forbidden, the different forms of knowledge become discursive regimes or relationships of strength, with equal status, in dispute. For this reason, Deleuze (2011), an author of Nietzschean inspiration and harsh expression of the irrationalism characteristic of the capitalist crisis beginning the late 1960s, stresses a quote by Paul Valéry: “as deep as the the skin”, in a clear defense that there is nothing to seek “beyond” (p. 11).

However, things go exactly the opposite way of relativistic beliefs, so the affirmation of the objectivity of knowledge is precisely what allows us the criticism (Bhaskar, 2008). In no way does the objectivity of knowledge mean neutrality of science (this is not the disagreement with the criticism of relativistic conceptions to positivism). We do not deny that values interfere with knowledge and knowledge with social values (Löwy, 2000); the exercise of science as necessarily critical cannot be neutral. But one cannot infer from it that it is impossible for science to correctly represent objects of reality, including social reality, as relativism assumes. “By reaching the essence of the object, that is: by capturing its structure and dynamics through analytical procedures and operating its synthesis, the researcher reproduces it

in thought” (Paulo Netto, 2011, p. 22). This search for the real constitution of the world, whether physical or social, implies posing alternative values, opposing truer conceptions to the less true ones, which better represent the world. And there is nothing metaphysical about that.

In addition, scientific discoveries generate effects on social values, challenging or dissolving certain beliefs (Medeiros, 2013); we highlight the Copernican revolution as a confrontation of ontologies (scientific *versus* religious) and, necessarily, of values. Excluding the claim of neutrality does not deny the possibility of objective knowledge and, in this sense, the verification of the truth about a reproduction of reality (theory) takes place in social and historical practice (Paulo Netto, 2011).

We should remember that a correct mirroring of the world is not moral, but a necessity of human praxis, without which work, the foundation of social being, would not exist. This is exactly why science must be critical: an activity that poses conceptions in opposition to one another, so that conceiving the objectivity of knowledge is a criterion of criticism. And objectivity is posed here in opposition to idealization, to the idea that the social world is what we accept it, or believe it, to be. Recognizing different categorical systems, for representing the world and procedures (paradigms) is only the inevitable procedure on account of the coexistence in the scientific environment. The critical procedure is to scrutinize the conception of the world underlying the categories of the system, the conditions of its genesis and social function (Lukács, 2020). “It is, in short, an ontological criticism” (Duayer, 2015, p. 150).

It is what allows identifying and confronting mystifications, reified and manipulative knowledge, whose ideological role becomes essential for the reproduction of dominant relations. In this sense, the movement to relativize reality or deny the fundamental role of reason in the unveiling of the movement of the real, suggesting that the real is a matter of single perspectives intuitively apprehended, seems unaware that the “command” of social reality continues to be conditioned by the manipulation of objective truth about such a reality. What made, and still makes, positivism impose itself in the epistemological field is not only a matter of strength, but the fact that it is considered the epistemological form sufficient for apprehending and manipulating immediate objectivities of this society, an expression of agnosticism. Irrationalist perspectivist relativism poses the problem of domination as if it were a problem of knowledge, of the consciousness of those who know, of “situated” knowledge, when it is in truth a problem concerning real objectivity – and the mystifying consciences and knowledge are conditioned by this same objectivity. It is a revolt against reality that eludes reality itself.

Therefore, we argue that explaining how the world works is necessarily criticizing current conceptions. Demystifying forms of consciousness by correctly apprehending aspects of reality is the “subversive content of science” (Medeiros, 2013, p. 79). The correct knowledge about the structures of reality and their causal chains potentiates human practice toward a greater degree of freedom. It allows human beings an ever wider dominion over the world.

Finally, reinforcing this emancipatory potential and the truth value of science, we should precisely highlight its connection with reality. (Social) science (included) is about what reality is. In the case of the Social Sciences, due to the historical character of its object, theories can never be predictive and definitive, but only explanatory, as they seek to explain nature, the structures that condition social phenomena, and indicate legalities that present themselves as trends in a certain historical-social context. A theory with greater explanatory power (or greater critical capacity) should be able to: (a) demonstrate the falsity of the theories or beliefs it criticizes; (b) provide an alternative, more comprehensive explanation for the phenomena addressed by the theory it criticizes; and (c) indicate the conditions for production and support of the conceptions it criticizes (Medeiros, 2013).

This last element is fundamental to our argument since we consider the possibility that mistaken theories may inform concrete immediate practices. Thus, to criticize certain conceptions is “to criticize any action informed, or practice sustained, by that belief or theory” (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 243). Put another way, theoretical criticism is the criticism of objects or objective relations that make certain conceptions, beliefs and objectivities socially necessary (albeit false). Thus, as Bhaskar (1998) declares, “Once we have accomplished this, we have done as much as science alone can do for society and people. And the point becomes to transform them” (p. 243).

## **Final considerations: psychology and ontological criticism**

In view of the discussion above, we contend that the ontological analysis of psychology must be undertaken based on the conception of subject that informs the different schools, all the more so because this this conception implies the characteristics of the production of knowledge, and because therefrom the proposals, or models, of professional exercise are derived. However, we notice that instead of asking about “what the subject is”, psychology has developed around the question of “how to know the subject”.

In 1862, Wundt presented his program for a scientific psychology, an expression of the need he identifies to undertake a radical reform in psychology,

notably in research methods, in agreement with the Natural Sciences. Thus, he contended that questions about the nature and origin of the soul should not be a concern of psychology, since they cannot be approached scientifically. Thus, in spite of major technical and methodological progress, the theoretical-conceptual dispersion seen today reveals that “we have not made any progress in relation to its basic issues – in the sense of at least moving toward a minimum consensus on its philosophical foundations” (Tweney & Budzynski, 2000 cited by Araújo, 2007, p. 26). According to Araújo (2007), it was Wundt, “more than any other, who strove to found a new model of psychology, guided primarily by a radical methodological reform, which sought to break the traditional ties with metaphysical speculation, aiming at an approximation with the Natural Sciences” (p. 27).

The objective of this paper is not to analyze the theoretical-epistemological evolution of Wundt, but only to signal the elements that demarcate his commitment to the construction of a general theory of knowledge, or “antiontologism”, of gnosiological bias, adopted as the foundation of his psychology project. In this direction, he importantly states that

the theory of knowledge has to describe not the historical development, but the logical development of knowledge. Therefore, it consists essentially of an application of the logical laws of thought both to the psychological genesis of our world concepts and to the historical development of the scientific knowledge about the world. (Wundt, 1889 cited by Araújo, 2007, p. 165)

By refusing to discuss the conception of subject underlying the conceptions of object and method, the psychologies deepen the differences to such an extent that, in the field of philosophy of science, there is no alternative but to assume the paradigmatic perspective, with its already shown implications of an irrationalist and relativistic nature, or to rely on a “scientistic mimicry”

(Martin-Baró, 1986/2011), modeled after the method of the Natural Sciences and founds a unity in a form of apology of the capitalist order.

On the other hand, insofar as we argue that the object of psychology is the human being and we understand that he is a historical and social being, the knowledge produced about him can only lead to a good outcome if the method used is supported by an ontological perspective. In this sense, deepening the analysis necessarily requires unveiling the conception of human being underlying the different schools of psychology and criticizing them in view of the concrete subject being dealt with in different social contexts.

Ontological criticism, that is, the one that confronts the figurations of the world present in different conceptions – and the very relations that support such figurations as socially necessary –, such as that of the social being, allows overcoming both the instrumental and relativistic character of the social science – psychological science included – to develop its emancipatory potential. Such potential, we stress, does not replace political action, and in itself is a tool of that action. Its horizon is the unveiling of reality, its objectivity in process, providing humans with an informed and transformative practice. Demystifying the immediate reality and the conceptions that legitimize and naturalize such reality is the role of any social science, as is the case of psychology. For this reason, psychology cannot dispense with criticism of the conceptions of the subject that underlie its distinct branches. It is a necessary, albeit not sufficient, condition of a science with emancipatory content.

By analyzing this specific way of being, we intend to demonstrate that the negation of ontology is a characteristic that unites positivism to several branches of epistemology that attempt to criticize/overcome it. The question that guides us on this path, then, is: how can an ontological conception of the human being and society illuminate scientific practice in psychology? Put another way, how can ontological discussion take Psychology out of the deadlock it finds itself in?

## **Psicologia e ontologia: fundamentos para uma reflexão crítica sobre a produção de conhecimento**

**Resumo:** Problematizamos a prática científica na psicologia e apresentamos elementos teóricos que possibilitam uma crítica ontológica a esse campo. Consideramos que falta à produção de conhecimento psicológico uma concepção ontológica sobre a sociedade, o agir humano e a produção do conhecimento, secundarizando a investigação e o debate a respeito do que é o próprio ser sobre o qual o conhecimento se debruça. Concluímos afirmando que tal postura resulta no aprofundamento das divergências entre as diferentes escolas da psicologia, notadamente de objeto e de método, e que é necessário aprofundar a análise no sentido de desvelar a concepção de ser humano que subjaz às diferentes escolas, criticando-a tendo em vista o sujeito concreto com o qual se lida nos diferentes contextos sociais.

**Palavras-chave:** ciência, ontologia, psicologia.



## Psychologie et ontologie : fondements d'une réflexion critique sur la production de la connaissance

**Résumé :** Nous discutons la pratique scientifique en psychologie et présentons des éléments théoriques qui permettent une critique ontologique de ce domaine. Nous considérons que la production de connaissances psychologiques manque d'une conception ontologique de la société, de l'action humaine et de la production de la connaissance, mettant de côté l'investigation et le débat sur ce qu'est l'être même sur lequel cette connaissance se concentre. On conclut en affirmant qu'une telle posture a pour conséquence d'approfondir les divergences entre les différentes écoles de psychologie, notamment d'objet et de méthode, et qu'il est nécessaire d'approfondir l'analyse afin de dévoiler la conception d'être humain qui sous-tend les différentes écoles, en la critiquant au regard du sujet concret qu'elle traite dans différents contextes sociaux.

**Mots-clés:** science, ontologie, psychologie.

## Psicología y ontología: elementos para una reflexión crítica sobre la producción de conocimiento

**Resumen:** En este texto, problematizamos la práctica científica en la psicología y presentamos elementos teóricos que posibilitan una crítica ontológica a ese campo. Consideramos que falta a la producción de conocimiento psicológico una concepción ontológica sobre la sociedad, la acción humana y la producción de conocimiento, subordinando la investigación y el debate acerca de lo que es el propio ser sobre el cual el conocimiento se centra. Concluimos que tal postura da como resultado la profundización de divergencias entre las diferentes escuelas de psicología, de objeto y de método, y que es necesario profundizar el análisis en el sentido de desvelar la concepción de ser humano que subyace a las diferentes escuelas, criticándola al considerar el sujeto concreto con el que lidia en los diferentes contextos sociales.

**Palabras clave:** ciencia, ontología, psicología.

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