

Regarding the word "ontology"

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Greetings Doctors

This word is a compound of two ancient Greek words, "onta" and "logos", although this compound is a modern invention, and was not in ancient vocabulary. The word "ta onta" has come into English with only a vowel change or two as "entity". "Logos" means word/ account/ story/ reason/ science of, etc. So "ontology" is the story about entities - an account of what "things" there really are, or in other words, what "being" itself really is. So a materialist ontology, for example, says that the only things that really exist are atoms of matter, and everything else is built up out of them.

Materialism is an example of a monist ontology, because it says that there's ultimately only one kind of stuff (matter). A dualist ontology in contrast (like say Descartes') says no, there is also a second type of really existent substance called mind or soul or psyche or spirit or whatever (Descartes writing in Latin called *it res cogitans*, which means "thinking stuff") which interacts with matter (which he called *res extensa* which means "extended stuff," i.e. stuff that takes up space) but is fundamentally different to it in nature (mind not taking up space, according to Descartes). Not all monist ontologies are materialist: an idealist (like Leibniz or Hegel) agrees with the materialist that there is only one kind of substance which is ultimately real, but disagrees that this is matter, maintaining instead that that substance is "mind" (or "spirit" if you prefer: *Geist* in German), and that matter, like everything else, is really only a kind of idea in that mind.

The word ontology was introduced into philosophical vocabulary by Christian Wolff (a protégé of Leibniz) who held concurrent chairs in philosophy and in mathematics at the University of Halle in Germany in the early 18th century. He published a work called "Ontologia" in 1729 which popularized the term, but as the OED points out, one Jean Le Clerc had used the word in a French publication in 1692, and as Etienne Gilson points in his brilliant book *Being and Some Philosophers*, a German called Clauberg had coined the term "Ontosophiae" as early as 1647 as a word for "first philosophy" (which was the Greek and Latin term for the most basic account of what really exists), so the word had been in the air throughout the 17th century. I suspect in your on-air speculations this morning concerning the meaning of "ontology" that you were thinking of the word "(a)etiology" (the initial "a" is optional: in Latin the word begins with the letter "æ", a distinct vowel in Latin and so only one letter, sometimes translated as "e", sometimes as "a" and sometimes written as two distinct characters "ae")

meaning the science of causes, from the Greek word "aitia" meaning "cause." Like "ontology" this was not an ancient word, but a compound coined during the scientific revolution to designate that part of medical science which investigates the causes of diseases (first recorded instance 1660).

I've never read R.D.Laing, and can't remember the exact phrase you were citing, but it seemed to mean something like "our account of what people really are" - namely, the dipole of "real" inner person and "false" outer person - and hence a psychological "ontology", so to speak (strictly speaking, really only a psyche-logy and not an entity-logy in the broader sense). I use the scare quotes around "real" and "false" because these words are value terms encoding the mistaken judgment that we could in an ideal world shed our outer skin of appearance and be nothing but our true essential self. This misleading ideal of psychological health is rooted in the metaphysics of the Islamo-Christian religion, which borrowed from Gnostic dualism the doctrine that there are two creators at battle in the world (God of light / God of darkness) when Augustine converted from Manicheism to Christianity in 386 AD and set about laying the groundwork for what became modern subjectivity by fusing Judaic racial-electivism (that only a people are "chosen", not individuals) with Greek fatalism (individual fates are assigned at birth, and the only choice a person then has is to either struggle against or go willingly along with their fate). The Gnostic dualism is re-cast by Augustine as God vs Satan (this latter simply being the ancient Hebrew word for enemy), and the individual gets reinvented as the battle-field where the inner/ true/ light/ good/ spiritual forces wage war with the outer/ false/ dark/ bad/ bodily forces. The Christian thus gets construed as a kind of "double agent" - "in the world but not of the world" as St. Paul puts it in the bible - who has fallen or strayed into the world, from which it is the meaning of its life to escape and to get back to "heaven". The meaning of freedom is then interpreted as a choice between these two fates: heaven or the world. This sets the stage for the evolution of modern subjectivity, in which freedom becomes the ability to create your own fate, and even in sense, your own "self".

Before Nietzsche's "death of God," this meant Kant's transcendental idealism - that we can deduce the transcendent principles (laws of mental nature) which make our experience possible. But those rules are set - are laws, just as much as the laws of physics, chemistry or biology - and so what our minds can do is set in the same way that tracks set what a train can do. But after God's death, the absolute nature of those laws alters, and they appear instead as more like human laws: rules we hold for good reasons, but that we are able to change in certain circumstances. This is Heidegger's phenomenological ontology - roughly, that appearance and being are not opposite, but in a complicated

sense, the same (like Freud's idea that a neurotic who pretends to be healthy for long enough actually becomes healthy through becoming obsessed with the role of normality). The idea is that on a basic level we become what we interpret ourselves to be - that appearance is our being, although layered through many levels of appearance right down to how we appear to ourselves - in other words, that the question of how we act and what we are could be called interdependent variables. The laws of the mind are not laws of nature but human artifacts, and like the laws of a country are both in one sense necessary - we must have laws of some sort - but also in another sense contingent - they can in fact be altered under special circumstances, and are on the whole evolving over time. The basic point is that the human race must in a real sense "play God" with itself - continually re-create itself in its own image, for nothing higher is doing the creating. Once God is dead, what this image is is no longer set absolutely. We must take responsibility for it ourselves: to have to decide, in a sense, how our future evolution shall proceed.

Enough already with the philosophy lecture! Thanks for the interesting show.

regards,

David Rathbone.