

# Can Ontology Inform Ontologies?

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Traditionally, since it was coined in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century by German school-philosophy, the word “ontology” has been used to name a field of metaphysics as well as distinct metaphysical doctrines. Since the 1990s, the word “ontology” appears increasingly in information sciences, and likewise in fields that have been subjected to ‘informatisation’ such as biology, geography, and medicine. In all these fields, however, the word “ontology” is being used with different meanings, and for the most part with meanings that are distant from its philosophical roots.

Given the obvious centrality and significance of the word “ontology” in the contemporary information sciences, both the terminological indeterminateness and the apparent semantic change are issues warranting investigation. A particular motivation for an inquiry derives from the context at hand, since the theoretical foundations of Formal Concept Analysis have already been subjected to ontological considerations, and methods of Formal Concept Analysis have been applied to the development of ontologies in the information sciences.

Starting from etymological considerations, significant developments in ontological thought in the history of occidental philosophy are summarised. Special attention is given to the separation of ontology from classical metaphysics, the emancipation of the sciences from philosophy, and the concurrent reconfiguration of the relation between science and philosophy. These developments in western knowledge constitute the condition of the possibility for the appropriation of modes of ontological thought by the information sciences and beyond.

Subsequently, a range of meanings of the word “ontology” in the information sciences is identified. It is conjectured that the multiplicity of meanings can be explained by associating selected connotations of “ontology” with the corresponding problems information scientists try to solve. This exercise discloses semantic changes of the word “ontology,” which resulted from the transformation of a philosophical term into a scientific-practical term. These semantic changes characterise the relationship between philosophy and information sciences with respect to ontology as a problem — whether (philosophical) ontology can or actually does inform the notions of ontology in the information sciences.

Concluding, some brief reflections on the relation between Formal Concept Analysis and ontology — with reference to Rudolf Wille’s proposal of a Semantology — are offered.