



## CHAPTER 5:

# YEAH, BUT DO ONTOLOGY AND EPISTEMOLOGY HELP YOU ELIMINATE JAR JAR BINKS WITH HEADCAN(N)ONS? PART 2

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*'That's a very fancy sword,' says Mikezilla, sceptically, 'And I can see how the backpack would be useful, but I think we're still lost?'*

*'Ah well, that's the thing,' says Markzilla, momentarily pausing his sword swishing to stop the hat falling over his eyes. 'With these, we can work out what "lost" actually means.'*



## Answering the question

As mentioned at the start of the previous chapter, when discussing ontology and epistemology, there's always another nuance you can bring to the discussion. We had to stop critiquing what we were saying and adding another level when we found a generalisation that didn't apply, or a definition that needed disambiguation before this topic took over the book, which is why you'll still be able to identify a couple of holes here and there. At the point at which we'd stopped it had still grown to fill two chapters. Which is why this is part two.

If you've not read part one, then we strongly suggest you start there as the following won't make sense otherwise (unless you're already very familiar with ontology, epistemology and *Star Wars* fandom, in which case, skip both parts). Still with us? Right then, let's bring this back to education and answer our question.

Pedagogy, learning and related areas such as engagement, collaboration and affect are subjective experiences that translate badly from a classroom to a laboratory environment, so a purely positivist approach only helps to understand some aspects of them in some contexts. Classrooms aren't good settings for positivist experiments – there are far too many variables to take into account, and good ethical reasons to avoid wasting the time of students and teachers by restricting their behaviour to make your research easier.

Interpretivist investigations can try the same intervention in different contexts, or repeat a study in the same context. The more detail you have about the effects of an intervention, the more certain you can be that it has certain effects under certain conditions. These findings can be used to help guide practice.

A particular challenge when it comes to researching education is that learning can rarely be observed, so a positivist

study has to select measurable proxies for learning. Typically, this involves a test before the study, to assess what learners know at that point, and a test after the study, to assess what learners know at that point.

However, this leads to multiple problems: individuals may have learned things that are not covered by the test, they may have taken information on board that will lead to learning in the future, or they may have a bad day and perform worse on the post-test than on the pre-test. A positivist stance can be harmful because it attempts to quantify things that are not quantifiable, and it attempts to classify when that classification is of no benefit to the learner. All these measurements use a positivist proxy to answer a question that is not positivist in nature: 'Are people learning?'

If a question can be answered by measuring something, that's usually the approach that will provide the most definite answer. For example, if we want to know about the ways a virus can be transmitted, then we take a positivist approach, carry out laboratory trials, make appropriate measurements and come up with definitive answers. A positivist answer (when applicable) is always going to be more robust than an interpretivist one. In terms of the scale we introduced in the previous chapter, a 2 is better than a 3.

But if we want to know the best way of encouraging people to change their behaviour to minimise transmission of a virus, then we need an interpretivist approach. We don't have a set of identical planets on which we can run a comparative experiment testing alternative approaches. Even if we did, that would be an ethically dubious experiment. Interpretivism is the way forward, even though we can't be sure that we have definitely got the right answer.

So, although you need to go to medical scientists to find out how a disease is transmitted, if you're telling people how to

limit its transmission, it's best not to leave this to the medical scientists, because decision-making is a process that deals with people's feelings, which requires a different approach (Maani and Galea, 2021). If you want to get a message about conservation out to indigenous peoples, you need to mix the science about the environment with the knowledge of local people, as they are the experts on what the natural world means to them (Novera and Kark, 2022).

Mixing epistemologies in this way is called Critical Realism (capital C capital R). If pressed, some Critical Realists would say they're at the positivist end of the scale and are pretty sure that there's an observable reality out there (1 or 2). Some would be at the interpretivist end of the scale and believe it all depends (6 or 7). Others would be less certain, hovering in the middle of the scale. However, when it comes to selecting a research approach, they'd all begin by asking, 'What are the ontological properties of that which is being investigated?' They'd then apply the correct epistemological frame. For a fuller explanation of this approach, take a look at Tom Fryer's *Short Guide to Ontology and Epistemology and Why Everyone Should be a Critical Realist* (Fryer, 2022).

To recap, then:

1. Ontology is what does and doesn't exist and how it is categorised.
2. Epistemology is what you choose to count as evidence and how you go about finding things out.
3. Epistemology offers two potential approaches – positivism aspires to be objective, while interpretivism is consciously subjective.
4. Some forms of knowledge are open to measurement, in which case measure them. Some aren't, in which case, don't.

5. No knowledge is completely objective, but some is more objective than others. Where it's more open to interpretation, the more 'inter' your subjectivity, the more trustworthy your results will be.

## The answer

Now that we've looked at the extent to which something can be said to be real or not, let's mess up our whole picture of reality by introducing the concept of kayfabe. Kayfabe is a term used in professional wrestling, but the phrase reveals wrestling's roots in the carnival tradition (Childs, 2022).

Basically, kayfabe is a term for a world of pretence, where you put reality on one side for a while and treat a fictional world as if it were real. The idea of 'as if' is inherent in a lot of human experience, if not the majority, and is explored in Michael Saler's book of the same name (Salter, 2012).

We use kayfabe a lot in this book. When we talk about Yoda as a supply teacher, we know he's not really a supply teacher. In fact, we know he's not real, full stop. Within the first part of each chapter we discuss the reality of the pedagogical theory (or degree of reality of it) and the real history of the aspect of popular culture we are focusing on. But in 'The Answer' parts, we engage with the fictional world as if it were real, only rarely stepping out of the pretence. We don't explicitly acknowledge every time that we know those texts exist in that way for a whole set of cultural, business, production, narrative reasons. While we're in the as-if space, those things are put to one side.

The distinction is slightly blurred in the chapters that are about real events like the von Trapp family's escape from Austria, or the Apollo 13 mission, but even then we mainly talk about the slightly fictionalised account we've seen in the movies.

So, to get back to answering our question here: **How do ontology and epistemology help you annihilate Jar Jar Binks with headcan(n)ons?**

We're going to enter the kayfabe of pretending that the *Star Wars* universe is real. For the metaphor to work, we're going to pretend that the reality of that universe, the laws, the history, the lifeforms all have their reality determined, not by what has actually happened or what actually exists (what we would call 'objective reality' in our actual universe), but by the mysterious God-like (to any fictional characters within that universe) entity known as the LucasFilm Story Group. This is what is meant by canon within the *Star Wars* universe. If you live in the *Star Wars* universe, it's what's real.

Let's start with Jar Jar Binks, who's probably the most detested character in the *Star Wars* universe. He's a Gungan, an amphibious indigenous lifeform on a planet ruled by humans. Discussing Jar Jar means we need to depart from the single author voice, as Mikezilla and Markzilla have different takes on the character.

Mikezilla describes him as:

*Possibly the most loathed character in all of creation, a slightly racist CGI-nightmare creature introduced in the prequel trilogy, who essentially added nothing to the story at all. It's just a horrible, wretched, irritating character who served no significant narrative purpose. -Mikezilla*



Markzilla's view is:

*The prequel trilogy is basically about Emperor Palpatine's rise to power. There's the Republic, the good guys. There are also the Separatists, who are challenging the good guys. But*




*Palpatine is the head of both. He's a chancellor of the Republic and he's also secretly running the Separatists. Because the Separatists are a threat, this is used by Palpatine to accrue more and more power in order to defend the Republic. It's Jar Jar who moves the motion to elect Palpatine to be the head of the Senate. Jar Jar is the biggest stooge ever. He's the reason why the Empire ends up being created. It really all comes down to that one bad decision that Jar Jar Binks makes. -Markzilla*

Post-structuralism states that differences in interpretation like this occur all the time. From their perspective, no literary text has a single meaning – instead, every reader assigns it a new meaning. In his seminal text, *Mythologies* (1957), Roland Barthes proposes that speech, photographs, movies and other types of text all have a language in them that has already been worked on. The meaning presented in them may be presented as natural, but they're never simple representations of reality because they contain an element of myth, an implicit set of assumptions. He gives the example of a photograph on the cover of *Paris Match* magazine showing a black soldier saluting the French flag. The editor's intent is to convey that the French Empire is so great everyone accepts it, whereas the viewer may interpret the image as an example of the pervasiveness of indoctrination. Images and words have a different meaning for each reader, the meaning is not inherent in the text itself.

Any individual text, movie or photograph will be interpreted in different ways. However, a transmedia narrative such as *Star Wars* is made up of multiple texts, providing an additional option. People can decide for themselves which of these texts form part of the narrative. The texts they include constitute their personal headcanon. Headcanon is the individual's personal selection of which version 'counts'. Each viewer makes ontological decisions as to what does and doesn't exist within their *Star Wars* universe.


Here's Mikezilla's view, which eliminates Jar Jar Binks by removing his very existence from the *Star Wars* reality:

*What I choose to count as evidence would be something very interpretivist. It might be what I felt spoke to me the most; which bits I find most compelling in the Star Wars universe. I might canvas my friends to see which bits are their favourites as well and build that into my wider narrative. Based on that, I would essentially eliminate the prequel trilogies and go back to a situation where we've just got the original three movies, probably some very heavy director's cuts of the most recent three movies, all the old video games and the the Young Jedi Knights books would be my personal headcanon, which would in turn murder Jar Jar Binks with a headcan[n]on. -Mikezilla*



Here's Markzilla's interpretation, which reinstates Jar Jar by accepting the texts that contain Jar Jar Binks as part of his headcanon:

*I like my narratives to be as full as possible, so I'll include any text that's going, as long as it fits. So the prequels, the cartoons, the audio plays, all of it will go in (although my jury is still out on fan fiction). Where I struggled with the sequel trilogy is that there's such a long gap between Return of the Jedi and The Force Awakens that the Star Wars universe feels as if it's been in suspended animation. The lack of movement of the key players for 30 years just feels empty compared to the Legends stuff with the Dark Empire, the Yuzhan Vong invasion and so on. So my headcanon is the Disney canon stuff up until 5ABY (the end of Return of the Jedi) and the Legends stuff from that point on. Jar Jar Lives! -Markzilla*



Parts of the *Star Wars* fandom can be quite aggressive in their interactions with other parts. Particular headcanons become so important to some fans that they feel the need for other people to validate and accept their headcanon. They don't acknowledge the interpretivist nature of the selection process by which they constructed their personal narratives. Instead, they produce what they claim to be objective rationales for that selection, then become angry when others interpret the reality of the *Star Wars* universe in a different way.

However, the views of both Markzilla and Mikezilla are interpretivist, in that they are picking and choosing which bits they want to include in their version of the *Star Wars* universe.

A positivist approach would be to reject any personal selection, and only include elements that are confirmed as part of the official version by the LucasFilm Story Group. Within our metaphor, they are the final arbiters of what is, and what isn't, real within that world.

Our power as audience members, rather than helpless fictional peons within that universe, is that as it's our money, our bookshelves, and our hard drives, we can create our own narrative. The key thing is to acknowledge that this has no validity beyond our own heads, but that it also doesn't need to.

In summary, the answer to our question is that if we were to take a positivist approach to what is (after all) a fictional universe, we would accept the observational data presented by the Disney Corporation that everything it produces counts as objective reality for the consumers of the *Star Wars* franchise.

Both Mark and Mike take the ontological view that reality in the *Star Wars* universe depends on the elements that they find the most compelling. Although both of their epistemological approaches are interpretivist and subjective, Mark accepts Jar Jar's reality, but Mike's interpretation eliminates Jar Jar Binks by denying his reality.

## Tips for practice

Whether you're at the positivist end of the scale and are convinced there's an observable reality out there, or at the interpretivist end and believe that everything depends on the context, in practice, your choice of approach needs to depend on the ontological nature of the area you're looking at. If you can measure it, then positivism is the way to go. If you can't, then interpretivism is appropriate. The more your approach is based on valid and reliable measurements, the more possible it is to be sure you're near the right answer, but no answer is ever absolutely the truth. That's no reason to give up trying to be as objective as possible. Conversely, a subjective approach is the only way of answering some questions, even when we know the results won't generalise beyond a certain context. What's important is that, along with 'What do we know?', we're also asking 'How well do we know it?' If you want to use a 1 to 7 scale (or 1.1 to 6.9), feel free.

Another top tip is: don't get flummoxed by the terminology. There's always a temptation in academic discussions to batter each other with big, long words (see our chapter on cognitive load and the *Hitchhiker's Guide* for more examples). If it's useful to replace them with words that mean something to you, and which make things clearer for your reader, that's OK too. Just remember to define those words for your reader at the start.

## There's always a bigger reference

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