Why I am not a performativist (yet)

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I appreciate Garud, Gehman, and Giuliani's thoughtful response to my recent paper in the Journal of Business Venturing. I must admit that I find the performativity approach that they advocate intriguing and, indeed, promising. However, I cannot support performativity as a separate and stand-alone meta-theoretic foundation for entrepreneurship research. Instead, my desire is to see performativity reconfigured in accordance with and atop an interpretivist foundation.

Garud, Gehman, and Giuliani (hereafter GGG), I think, accurately portray the primary differences between interpretivism and performativity in its current state. However, these differences reveal weaknesses not in interpretivism, but in performativity's meta-theoretic positioning that, for me, make it unsatisfactory as a foundation for entrepreneurship theory. However, as I will put forth here, these issues can be surmounted without abrogating the foundational tenets of performativity by reconfiguring it upon inter-pretivism's foundation. But, first, I must respond to the perceived weaknesses in interpretivism's framework that GGG have asserted.

1. The 'problems' of interpretivism

My general thesis is, in essence, that entrepreneurship theory's progress has been impeded by scholars' sympathy toward unsound meta-theoretical assumptions that do not, perhaps, align with their true beliefs (philosophical assumptions), lending to errors in their research. Most have, rightly I think, abandoned a strict modernist functionalism due to their recognition, for example, that the phenomena they study (e.g. markets, firms, innovations) are not 'real' in the same sense that a rock or tree is 'real,' and cannot be studied as such. However, it is my perception that most entrepreneurship scholars are also averse to the more radical phenomen-ologies (e.g. Derrida's deconstructionism or Rory's radical pragmatism) that eschew objective truth and, thus, science, altogether. In search of some middle ground, then, they have landed upon stratified meta-theories (e.g. realism, structuration), which, as I and others have argued, are unsound.

I argue that there is a better middle ground for the social sciences, broadly, and for entrepreneurship, specifically, one that does not attempt to straddle incommensurable paradigms. Interpretivism is a broad tent. While it encompasses many of those radical phenomenologies that reject objective truth, it also includes more moderate approaches, such as Husserl's (1970, 2001) phenom-enology,[1] realist phenomenology (e.g. Hartmann, 2012; Reinach, 1989), and nominalism (e.g. Azzouni, 2004, 2017). I suspect that entrepreneurship theorists will find some of those moderate interpretivist positions quite true to their own assumptions.

GGG perceive two weaknesses in the moderate interpretivist approach that I espouse, which, for them, demonstrate performa-tivity's superiority as a foundation for entrepreneurship. The first is its adherence to a meta-theoretical dualism—the separation of reality and individual experience or knowledge of that reality. The second is a concern over interpretivism's emphasis on individual intentionality, lending, perhaps, to an overly strong position of heroic control over outcomes. My response to these criticisms is simple: these are not bugs, but features, and necessary to entrepreneurship theory. However, some clarifications are necessary.

1.1. Dualism

For GGG, "it is not clear why it is that the physical (or material in our words) is 'real' but must be interpreted, whereas the social is

not 'real' yet serves as a focal point for conformity through choice." This tendency to want to see non-material 'things' as ontologically real merely because they can have strong causal influence is at the heart of my critique of realism (Packard, 2017). It is an error of logic, an 'affirming of the consequent': if a thing is 'real,' then it has causal properties (if A, then B). Social phenomena have causal properties (B). Therefore, social phenomena are real (A). But A does not follow from B.

The philosophical debate over the nature of truth, reality, and knowledge has challenged our assumptions over what is or may not be scientifically attainable. For example, is it possible to determine or predict entrepreneurship *ex ante*? While I will not presume to resolve this debate, we must, unfortunately, 'pick sides.' Our assumptions regarding truth and knowledge are fundamental, leading to vastly different theoretical conclusions and methodological approaches to our study (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). We cannot disregard them.

In as clear of terms as I can muster in this short space, my position, like Kierkegaard (2009), Husserl (2001), and others, is that there are distinct forms of truth and knowledge. Some truths are *objective*, their existence independent of the believer, such as spatiotemporal reality and logical tautologies. Other truths are *subjective*—beauty, meaning, purpose, and so forth—which are true for and because of the individual who believes them, but not necessarily for others. Other 'things' (i.e. concepts) do not belong in the category of ontology, but are epistemological tools useful for making sense of one's contextualized existence. Philosophers and scientists have tried to assert that *all* truths are of the same nature. Modernist philosophers, intent on the natural sciences, asserted that all truths are objective, and attempted to 'objectify' subjective truths.[2] Certain post-modern philosophers, attending to social scientific topics such as history and language, responded that all truths are instead subjective, 'subjectifying' objective truths.[3] Both positions, I think, overreach. Confounding distinct forms of truth, knowledge, and reality is the source of important errors within the social sciences, including our field of entrepreneurship.

1.1.1. Dualism, representationalism, and concepts: a clarification

If we accept that there exists an objective reality, then the distinction between this reality and one's knowledge of it seems beyond reproach. Illusions, deceptions, and misinterpretations, among other cognitive biases and errors, demonstrate that what one *thinks* of objective reality is, often and demonstrably, mistaken. Some have gone so far as to posit that our minds *deliberately* deceive us into perceiving a fictitious reality to improve survivability (e.g. Hoffman and Prakash, 2014). I simply do not see any way around a meta-theoretical dualism (such as representationalism). Reality and one's experience and, thus, knowledge of it *are* distinct and separable. This matters because how entrepreneurs behave is derived wholly from their subjective knowledge (derived from their perceptions of reality), whereas outcomes are a result of reality *as it is*, and not necessarily as the entrepreneur perceives it.

Performativity's dismissal of dualism is yet another logical fallacy: 'denying the antecedent.' Perceived errors in prevailing representationalist approaches led performativists (e.g. Barad, 2003) and other post-modernists (e.g. Butler, 1990; Rorty, 2009; Rouse, 1996) to dismiss dualism outright as impotent toward explaining structural power and systemic causality, where social structures self-propagate by defining and subjugating actors within them in such a way as to maintain and/or increase the power of those structures. However, the errors of certain dualistic representationalisms are insufficient to invalidate dualism (and objective reality) altogether.

For the prevailing representationalism—representative or indirect realism—the *referent* (i.e. that which is represented) is ontologically real, whereas the *representation* or *conception* of it is epistemic—an onto-epistemological dualism. Perception, for representationalism, is only of representations. We do not sense (e.g. see) the referent per se, but only a mental representation of the percepts that our senses capture and reproduce in some form within the 'mind's eye.' Thus, only representations produced through sensory experience are empirically 'observed' and can, thus, be reacted to. Performativists challenge this "presumption that representations… are more accessible to us than the things they supposedly represent" (Rouse, 1996: 209) as an unnecessary hold-over of Cartesian dualism. There is no reason, they argue, that we should have greater access to and understanding of representations than the referents that they derive from.[4] Thus, they land upon their "flat" onto-epistemology, without any separation of reality and perception.

The error in realist representationalism, and in performativity's resultant dismissal of dualism altogether, is a misunderstanding of the nature and scope of concepts. A *concept* is a mental construction of *meaning*, *purpose*, and *separation* ascribed to some 'thing' or representation as separated and characterized by the mind (Carruthers, 2003; Margolis and Laurence, 2007). Concepts can be formed to represent and understand *material* configurations (such as a 'chair'), but also *immaterial* ideas (such as 'Harry Potter' or the number 'two'). 'Chair' often (but not always[5]) has a material referent, i.e. matter configured in a particular form. Such matter is not inherently separate from other matter (e.g. the floor it touches) and has no meaning or purpose unless and until a concept (e.g. 'chair') is attached to it. An individual with no concept of 'chair' would see the matter and might ascribe to it a different, more familiar concept,

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[2] 'Objectifying' subjective truths by restating them in terms of objective mental states (e.g. "she believes the painting to be beautiful") is not as successful as it might appear. A key purpose for separating 'objective' from 'subjective' truths is to distinguish their knowability. We can approach 'objective' or 'scientific' knowledge of objective truths (although we can never reach them or, at least, know if we've reached them; Popper, 1962, 1972). However, subjective truths are beyond science. One cannot learn or understand what it is like to be another (see Nagel, 1974).

[3] Recognizing (correctly) that even objective truths are, strictly, unknowable—that our understanding of even physical reality is conceptual and attained only through fallible empirical experience—some philosophers (e.g. Derrida, 2016; Foucault, 1977) supposed that there could be no way to distinguish objective truths (referents) from subjective truths, and so subjectivity ought to be the default position.

[4] The famous 'homunculus' argument, for example, asks: if what you see is represented as a 'picture in your head,' then who is it inside your head that is viewing those pictures?

[5] For example, a fictional novel can depict a 'chair' without representing some objective (physical) matter.