



Philosophies of Qualitative Research

Svend Brinkmann

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CHAPTER

1 Introduction: Philosophy and Qualitative Research

Svend Brinkmann

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Abstract

The term *philosophy* has become extremely broad, and there can be a philosophy of almost anything. It is not unusual for the word philosophy to be used in connection with everything from large corporations to personal statements. The word can easily be misused, but it is commonly used to signal a serious reflection on fundamental principles. It literally means love (*philo*) of knowledge (*sophia*). This chapter provides some definitions of philosophy and qualitative research and gives an introduction to a number of philosophical themes that are relevant for qualitative researchers, covering the basics of epistemology and ontology and the various arguments in favor of realism and anti-realism.

Keywords: [qualitative research](#), [epistemology](#), [philosophy](#), [ethics](#), [ontology](#), [metaphysics](#)

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p. 1 THE TERM *philosophy* has become extremely broad, and there can be a philosophy of almost anything. Today, it is not unusual for the word philosophy to be used in connection with everything from large corporations (“Our philosophy is to . . .”) to personal statements (“My personal philosophy is based on . . .”). The word can easily be misused, but it is commonly used to signal a serious reflection on fundamental principles. It literally means love (*philo*) of knowledge (*sophia*). When I was a philosophy student, my classmates and I used to joke that whenever someone is pressed to answer two or three “why” questions, that person will unavoidably begin philosophizing:

Let’s go see a movie tonight!

Why?

Well, because we have worked hard and deserve to do something we simply feel like doing!

Why?

Well, I don't know. . . . Shouldn't we be allowed to do something we feel like doing from time to time? Uhm, perhaps it depends on what we feel like doing? How to distinguish worthy desires from unworthy ones?

OK, let's just go!

p. 2 So, we see that after a few questions that press someone to go beyond the immediate—for example, an immediate desire, belief, or idea—we arrive at philosophical reflections. Anyone who is lovingly (*philo*) interested in the process of developing fundamental knowledge (*sophia*) can be considered a philosopher.

What Is Philosophy?

Today, philosophy is taught in university departments just like any other discipline such as medicine or geography. This means that philosophy has come to be thought of as a body of knowledge and as a set of analytic skills, which (many philosophers hope) are useful for other disciplines and sciences and perhaps even in the world of business and politics. This contemporary conception of philosophy as just another scholarly discipline, however, is closely and specifically connected to our modern world and its obsession with utility and instrumentalism. Philosophy must somehow be useful today if it is to be considered as a legitimate discipline. However, as the famous historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot argued in his classic book, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Hadot, 1995), this was very different in earlier ages, when philosophy was not such an abstract discipline but, instead, a form of life. According to Hadot, philosophy as originally conceived was not primarily characterized by intellectual abstractions but, rather, by its intentions to form people and transform their souls. This involved a kind of self-formation, or *paideia* in Greek, which was best cultivated through dialogue, as illustrated most famously in Plato's dialogues with Socrates as the key protagonist. The major schools of ancient philosophy such as Platonism, Aristotelianism, Cynicism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism all offered ways of becoming human and attaining a worthy life form. For most of the schools, the goal was to realize a common human nature, although there was no universal agreement concerning the exact character of this.

p. 3 In the dialogue *Theaetetus*, Plato has Socrates state that “wonder is the only beginning of philosophy,” which is probably the most famous quote on the nature of philosophy. Philosophy begins with wonder, Socrates says—that is, in a kind of puzzlement concerning existence—leading one to ask the fundamental questions about life and death, good and evil, knowledge and ignorance. For Socrates—the philosopher who did not write anything but only asked questions—the practice of questioning was clearly more important than the answers being given. Often, in the Platonic dialogues, the conversationalists do not even arrive at an answer when discussing the perennial questions about justice, beauty, or the virtues but, rather, end in *aporia*—a state of confusion and intellectual impasse. But there is also in Plato a longing for eternally true and certain answers, especially concerning how to develop a good society, ultimately to be constructed on the basis of philosophers' universal knowledge of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Historians of philosophy still discuss the possible disagreements between Plato and Socrates on this point (Plato clearly being more in line with our contemporary theoretical understanding of philosophy, and Socrates representing the practice of questioning and philosophy as a process or an *elenchus*—a cooperative, dialogical method).

The contemporary philosopher Simon Critchley (2007) has given us an alternative conceptualization of the beginning of philosophy: “Philosophy begins in disappointment” (p. 1). On the one hand, as he sees it, philosophy stems from the disappointing realization that there is no justice in the world. We inhabit a violently unjust world, Critchley writes, where good people do not always win, and where tyrants may live happy lives. According to Critchley's analysis, the kind of disappointment that is associated with this

realization has led to ethics and political philosophy and a quest to improve society. On the other hand, there is the disappointment that there is no God. Now, this is obviously a source of disagreement (both in the times when philosophy was born and also today), and most people in the world do probably believe in some kind of transcendent deity, but according to Critchley, *philosophy* has its origins in a reflection on what to make of the meaning of life in a universe without a God. In other words, how can we resist nihilism, the idea that everything is meaningless? Can there be meaning only if a metaphysical creature creates and supports it, or are we as finite, mortal creatures capable of constructing stable meaning in our lives? This age-old philosophical question is also a significant source of disagreement among qualitative researchers in a more tangible way: Is meaning something we *find* in our empirical materials or something we *make*? Are we primarily *explorers* of meaning or *creators* of meaning?

p. 4 Whether it is Platonic wonder or Critchleyan disappointment that are singled out as existential origins of philosophy, it can be appreciated that the discipline was originally a practice concerned with human *life* and not just with abstract thought. Philosophy, in this original sense, is an existential affair, intent to help us live our lives, although this is too often forgotten in today's sterile and scientific approaches to its teachings. The great American philosopher Stanley Cavell once defined philosophy as "education for grownups," which, in yet another way, points to the practical dimensions of the discipline. Humans have not invented philosophy simply in order to play intellectual games but, rather, because it is important for creatures like us to reflect on our world and find out how we ought to live. We shall see later in this book that the philosophical school known as pragmatism urges us to evaluate our thoughts and ideas relative to how well they enable us to live good lives.

A final aspect must be added to Critchley's point about disappointment: Fundamentally, philosophy is connected to the realization of human finitude. This was already evident in Socrates' words in the *Phaedo*, the dialogue that depicts the death of Socrates, when he explained that philosophizing is "training for death" (see also Hadot, 1995, p. 94). If we were immortal creatures, we would have no need to engage in philosophy because there would be no need to ask about what is truly significant (because nothing would then really matter, since everything could be done and redone endlessly). The idea of a connection between philosophy and mortality lived on through the teachings of such figures as Cicero in ancient Rome and Montaigne in French Renaissance humanism—philosophy being a sort of *Ars Moriendi*, a way of coming to terms with finitude in order to be able to live *and* die well, without fear or despair. With this, we are probably as far away as we can get from mainstream approaches to philosophy in current university departments. This book does not present philosophical exercises in any concrete way like the Stoics, for example, but it does share with Socrates, Cicero, Montaigne, and Critchley the view that philosophy is first and foremost a *practice*, a way of life that may inspire the qualitative researcher, just as it is also a systematic inquiry into the foundations of ethics, politics, aesthetics, and human knowledge. Addressing philosophies of qualitative research thus means addressing both the theoretical and the practical aspects ↵ of our inquiries and lives. I hope to be able to demonstrate that the philosophies of qualitative research are not just different sets of abstract principles but also different embodiments of modes of living and acting. Naturally, this leads to the next thorny question for a book on philosophies of qualitative research: What is qualitative research?

p. 5

What Is Qualitative Research?

There are almost as many answers to this question as there are people who self-identify as qualitative researchers. One generic, but quite extensive, definition of qualitative research has been given by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2011a) in their authoritative handbook:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices

transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

p. 6 I find this definition useful because it cuts across different paradigms in qualitative research (e.g., phenomenology, post-structuralism, and feminism), and it emphasizes the *practice* of research (rather than more abstract prescriptive principles), including how research should be seen as an activity in the world that changes it. However, like all definitions, it can be analyzed philosophically and be shown to embody various presuppositions that are not made explicit in the formulations as such. For example, the researcher is conceived as an *observer* who is located in the *world*. Many things can be implied by conceptualizing a researcher as an observer—does it mean, for example, that one is a passive spectator rather than an active participant in the activities of the world? And what is the world? This is definitely not an innocent word, but something laden with deep and potentially significant ↵ metaphysical assumptions. Is the world something that exists independently of the researcher/observer (that can be observed more or less veridically) or something that is created by the researcher in the act of observing? If there is one lesson to learn from the history of philosophy, it is that no concepts are innocent. Every term has a history and is saturated with philosophical presuppositions that may lead to various implications for research practice.

Another rich, yet potentially problematic term in the definition is “representation.” What does it mean to say that researchers “turn the world into a series of representation”? What kind of connection can one imagine to exist between, for example, the sounds emanating from the mouth of an interviewee and the ink on paper representing these sounds—and their alleged meaning? And how, in turn, can an overarching analytic category created by the researcher when confronted with the many pages of transcripts be said to represent the meaningful content of a concrete utterance? Qualitative research involves long chains of transformation and translation from (staying with interviewing as an example) research questions to interview questions to interviewee answers to recordings to transcriptions to codings and categorizations, which ultimately end up becoming an analysis or interpretation that is published and (if one is lucky) read by people who might even use what they have read to change their opinions, actions, or policies (Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) take the reader through this whole process of interview research). But how to understand the relation between the signifiers (representations) and the signified (that which is represented)? This is an ancient philosophical question of representation that dates back to the Greeks and which has been given numerous different answers, most of which remain implicit when we talk about “representation” today. Finally, to refer to one last bit from Denzin and Lincoln’s (2011a) definition, what can be meant by a “naturalistic approach,” studying things in their “natural settings”? What would an “unnatural setting” be? The authors probably think of laboratories or other experimental settings, but why are these less natural than, for example, an interview encounter or even what goes on in a school or workplace when this is observed by a fieldworker? Is there an implicit philosophy of authenticity lurking in the background of the definition?

p. 7 My goal here is not to tear the definition apart (as I stated previously, I find it useful and quite in line with how I would define qualitative research myself) but, rather, to argue that any definition imaginable (of qualitative research, but really of anything else too) implies a number of philosophical presuppositions about the researcher (as observer, participant, creator, interventionist, etc.), about the world (as dependent, independent, enacted, mute, etc.), and about the relation between them—and also about what can be known and about how it *ought* to be known. So we have all the major philosophical subdisciplines at work in an innocent-looking definition such as this one: ontology and metaphysics (What can be said to exist and how?), epistemology (What can we know and how?), ethics (What ought to be done and how?), and also—perhaps slightly more implicitly—political philosophy (What is a good and just society—and what role, if

any, should research and academic analyses play in creating it?) and even aesthetics (What is beauty—and what is its relation to knowledge?). In the following section, I further discuss the various questions that philosophy deals with and why these are relevant in qualitative research practices. After that, I present an (impossibly quick and dirty) account of how these questions have been raised and answered from the Greeks until the emergence of modern philosophy in the early 17th century (one can only love the long historical perspective of a discipline that considers what happened in the 17th century “modern”).

Basic Philosophical Questions

Philosophy deals with the fundamental questions for human beings—questions that are at once theoretical (e.g., What is the nature of reality?) and practical (e.g., How should we act?). It is commonplace to make a distinction between the theoretical subdisciplines of philosophy—to which ontology, metaphysics, and epistemology are normally said to belong—and the practical subdisciplines—with the main contenders being ethics and political philosophy. In addition, there are now a large number of specialized philosophical areas that are more difficult to place, such as the philosophy of mind, aesthetics, and the philosophy of law and jurisprudence.

p. 8 **Ontology and Metaphysics**

Ontology and metaphysics are often mentioned together. The word “metaphysics” sounds like a New Age or spiritual term, but it simply means “after physics” in Greek, due to the simple fact that Aristotle’s works on (what we now call) metaphysics were indexed after his work on physics. Physics is the science that deals with the physical world and how objects move through space and time, but metaphysics represents a deeper inquiry into what objects, space, and time ultimately are. Metaphysical questions thus concern the ultimate constituents of reality. Similarly, the term ontology derives from Greek and literally means the study (*logos*) of being (*ontos*). The battles in the history of philosophy over materialism (the world is ultimately made up of a physical substance, such as particles in movement) versus idealism (the world is ultimately constituted by ideas) seem to be perpetual, and in recent years they have been fought under the banner of the Science Wars, with materialists on the one side (defending the principles and methods of the natural sciences) and social constructionists on the other side (emphasizing the socially constructed nature of our ideas about the world).

More generally, this is also an ontological battle between realists and anti-realists. Realists believe that the world has certain properties independently of the human capacities of knowing them. There is a way the world is, which can be discovered and represented through the systematic use of scientific methods. Anti-realists deny this and argue that it is the human activity of knowing as such that creates what is known. This discussion can be staged in a quite general and overarching way, but typically it is framed in relation to specific regions of reality, so to speak. For example, most people are realists with respect to astronomical objects. We tend to think that the planet Neptune was there before it was discovered, and that it is not the investigative efforts of astronomers that have given this object its properties. These properties have been discovered rather than invented. However, when we speak of human life, matters are not that simple because the nature of human activity seems to be at least partly constituted by how we understand it and what we know about it. And what we know about it can seemingly be affected by the investigative efforts of human scientists. For example, it seems that ↴ a study of people’s political attitudes already implies an interpretation of what is meant by “political” and “attitude,” so these are not phenomena that exist independently and outside human interpretative practices. Furthermore, what we think of as “political attitudes” can sometimes be affected by the interpretations made by political scientists. This is the starting point for many interpretative researchers, who argue that the human and social sciences are trying to

p. 9

interpret a human reality that is already constituted by interpretations. Giddens (1976) has referred to this as a double hermeneutics—to indicate that social science consists of interpretations of interpretations—which may in turn become a triple hermeneutics, when researchers’ interpretations feed back into the lives of those who are interpreted. The philosopher Ian Hacking (1995) has analyzed this process as a “looping effect,” which can be said to be an interpretative dance between realism (there is *something* that is interpreted) and anti-realism (but this something is affected by our acts of interpretation). Hacking calls it “dynamic nominalism.”

No qualitative research endeavor is without ontological commitments. Often, these are kept quite implicit and are perhaps even invisible to the researcher. But sometimes they are discussed explicitly. Many phenomenologists will say, for example, that their scientific goal is to discover the structure of human consciousness and being-in-the-world—to un-conceal it, to use an expression from Heidegger (1927/1962)—which reveals a commitment to a certain form of realism (which, of course, comes in many varieties). Many discourse analysts will say instead that they study how human talk itself brings the phenomena (which are talked about) into the world *in* the act of talking (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Racism, for example, might from this perspective exist only as it is enacted in discursive practices, and researchers may themselves contribute to the development of or opposition to racism depending on how they address it. No talk is neutral, from the perspective of some forms of discourse analyses, because language is performative rather than representational—it creates what it talks about. This, obviously, is a form of ontological anti-realism. The discussion of realism and anti-realism dates back to the Greeks and was continued with particular force in the Middle Ages, and it is thus much older and broader than one could think.

p. 10 Epistemology

Epistemology is the philosophical theory of knowledge. All qualitative research projects embody ideas about what knowledge is and how it can be obtained. Is knowledge something *found* or *seen* in the world—by mirroring reality as accurately as possible? This is the epistemological realist position. Or is knowledge *constructed* on the basis of different kinds of interest on behalf of the scientists? This is the anti-realist position, insisting that the mirrors created by scientists (their theories, concepts, and methodologies) are crucial for how something comes to be seen, according to the constructionist viewpoint. Or, to invoke a third perspective, is knowledge perhaps not at all about seeing? This could mean that neither the realist position that emphasizes the seen nor the anti-realist position that stresses the tools of seeing are helpful. Pragmatists, dating back to American philosophers such as Peirce, James, and Dewey in the late 19th century, argue that knowledge is about *doing* rather than *seeing*. Our knowledge is thus valid if it enables us to address and solve an important problem that arises in our individual or collective lives. Knowledge only exists in an act of knowing and not as a kind of object or representation of the world.

By stressing active doing rather than passive observation, the pragmatists deconstructed the modernist epistemological tradition from Descartes onward (discussed in more detail later). In contrast, epistemology was not a key philosophical subdiscipline for the ancient Greeks. The Greeks were more interested in the structure of reality than in how humans come to know this reality. But with Descartes in the early 17th century, philosophy was transformed, and epistemology became its prime discipline. As discussed later, this was prompted by the new natural sciences and their mechanical worldview, which created a split between the knowing subject and the objects of which the subject can know. And it was continued in the British empiricist tradition represented by Locke, Berkeley, and Hume in the 17th and 18th centuries.

In a famous essay, Taylor (1995) argued that we must now “overcome epistemology” because epistemology is so closely connected to this (false—in his view) notion of the isolated subject that knows the world only through its representations of the world. Taylor finds that we really cannot make use of this way of

p. 11 approaching humans and their knowledge. Not only pragmatists but also ↪ phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty (who stressed that we know the world through bodily engagement), Wittgenstein (who argued that the meaning of language arises from its practical use and not from representational properties), and other significant philosophers from the 20th century strove to develop other (non-epistemological) ways of understanding the human being and its relation to the world (Dreyfus & Taylor, 2015). These are presented in Chapter 2, but the key problem arising from the epistemological endeavor still persists in qualitative research: Is this kind of inquiry—based on descriptions and interpretations of people’s sayings and doings—really about *representing* reality (as the epistemological tradition claims), or is it about something else for which we do not (yet) have a common term (different scholars use terms such as performing, enacting, or translating the world, depending on their philosophical leanings)?

Ethics

Moving on to practical philosophy and the question “How should I live?” we arrive at ethics or moral philosophy. “Ethics” derives from the Greek *ethos* (character) and “morality” from the Latin *mores* (which also means character, custom, or habit) (Annas, 2001). Although some philosophers stipulate a difference between the two terms, they can also be used interchangeably. Today, it is common to address ethics in relation to the social sciences generally, and qualitative inquiry specifically, simply as “research ethics.” Ethics here becomes a set of principles that should guide responsible research practices but is then conceived as something external to the process of knowing itself. This is based on the idea that scientific knowledge is and ought to be value neutral. The legacy from positivism (discussed in Chapter 3) looms large here, and the idea is that science should be as objective, valid, and reliable as possible rather than being based on values. However, there are good reasons to believe that knowledge is always already laden with values. To begin by stating the obvious: The values held in high regard by positivists (as well as by many others), such as objectivity, validity, and reliability, are *also* values, which do not merely have an epistemic component (about finding truth) but also an ethical component (Brinkmann, 2005b). Being objective and reliable are indeed ↪ moral virtues that we value in people, whether they are engaged in research practices or their everyday lives.

p. 12

Today, few scholars subscribe to the pure positivist view that science should be completely value neutral. If value neutrality is an illusion in any form of inquiry, the more interesting question becomes not *if* qualitative inquiry should build on values but, rather, *which* values researchers ought to subscribe to and possibly promote through their investigative endeavors. And here we find a rich variety of views and quite fruitful forms of disagreement. Some argue that qualitative research should both build upon and serve a democratic, communitarian ethic of care (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011a), whereas others argue that qualitative inquiry should build on the same kinds of value as other research practices (e.g., objectivity and validity) (Hammersley, 2008). There are today feminist, indigenous, social justice, queer, and critical race perspectives (and many others) that are each committed to laudable ethico-political values. The important point to understand in this discussion is that it seems impossible not to take sides, as Becker (1967) argued in his classic essay, “Whose Side Are We On?” That famous essay begins with the following sentence: “To have values or not to have values: The question is always with us” (p. 239). And, paradoxically, we must now say (against the positivists) that even the call to be “against values” in social science inquiry rests on certain values (for even value neutrality is a value), so we can never escape value-ladenness. Every fact loads a value, as Putnam (2002) has put it, and every value also loads a fact. But what *are* values? And how do we decide on which values we should be directed by in our qualitative research practices? These are key philosophical questions for qualitative researchers.

Political Philosophy

p. 13 These questions also relate to the communities and societies within which qualitative research projects are conducted. This takes us to another subdiscipline of practical philosophy, namely political philosophy. The word “political” derives from the Greek term *polis*, which referred to the city state. Aristotle famously defined the human being as a *zoon politikon* (i.e., a political animal), which is a creature that can only realize its nature within the organized life of a community. The Greeks stated, *Polis andra didaske*, which means that the city is the teacher of man. This has been a foundational principle for the social sciences since Plato and Aristotle and continues today in all its varieties: We become what we are within organized social relationships.

Although I return to Aristotle in Chapter 2, it is relevant to briefly discuss in the present context how he conceived of (what we today call) the social sciences as a moral and political enterprise. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of Aristotle as a figure in the history of ideas. He is largely responsible for having divided up the sciences into their current forms, and his distinction between practical and theoretical sciences is fundamental. In Book II of his work on ethics, the *Nichomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 1976), he distinguished practical inquiry from the theoretical:

Since the branch of philosophy on which we are at present engaged is not, like the others, theoretical in its aim—because we are studying not to know what goodness is, but how to become good men, since otherwise it would be useless—we must apply our minds to the problem of how our actions should be performed. (p. 93)

We should be aware, Aristotle notes, “that any account of conduct must be stated in outline and not in precise detail [because] accounts are to be required only in such a form as befits its subject-matter” (p. 93). Aristotle saw it as a sign of an immature intellect to demand mathematical precision in practical matters, since the subject matter of mathematics can be grasped with theoretical precision, whereas this is hardly the case with respect to matters concerning human conduct. As he states later in his *Ethics* (p. 213), the political sciences—what we would call social sciences today—are species of what he called *phronesis* (practical wisdom) rather than *episteme* (theoretical knowledge of that which is of necessity) (see Table 1.1). The object of the practical sciences is human conduct, and this is a highly particularistic, versatile, and changing phenomenon. Practical knowledge about such things consequently “involves knowledge of particular facts, which become known from experience” (p. 215) rather than from theoretical deduction. In effect, here is an argument in favor of working with experiential, qualitative approaches in the study of human action in its concrete manifestations.

Table 1.1 Forms of Knowledge According to Aristotle

Form of knowledge and associated virtue	Theoria—episteme	Poiesis—techne	Praxis—phronesis
Paradigmatic example	Astronomy	Craftsmanship	Ethical conduct
Qualitative research orientation	Developing theoretically grounded knowledge (e.g., classical phenomenology)	Employing research techniques (e.g., interviewing as a craft)	Effectuating good actions (e.g., participatory action research)

p. 14 Table 1.1 provides a simplified overview of Aristotle’s concepts of basic kinds of knowing and the virtues humans must possess in order for them to know something well. First, we have *theoria* or theoretical

knowledge, which concerns things that do not change in response to our activities of knowing (a paradigmatic example being astronomical knowledge). Aristotle uses the term *episteme* to refer to the virtue of thought needed to obtain theoretical knowledge. Next, Aristotle describes *poiesis* as a knowledgeable activity of making, which therefore concerns things that change in response to human activities. The paradigmatic example is the craftsman who possesses the adequate *techne* (a form of know-how) to build a house or make a pair of shoes. Finally, we have the activities of *praxis* and the virtue of *phronesis*, which resemble *poiesis/techne* in being about things that are affected by human action but differ because of the fact that activities of *praxis* are undertaken for their own sake and not for the sake of anything else. A craftsman builds something in order to make money or because it is useful to have a pair of shoes, but the *phronimos*—the person who is knowingly engaged in *praxis*—is doing something for its own sake. Ethical actions represent the paradigm of *phronesis* because good actions are conducted for their own sake and not for the sake of any ulterior purpose (according to Aristotle, this also applies to theoretical or epistemic knowledge, which represents its own purpose).

Aristotle also articulated other forms of knowledge, such as *sophia* (wisdom) and *nous* (the intellect), but the three forms laid out in Table 1.1 are the most significant ones. All three can be connected to qualitative research orientations—that is, to arguments about the basic form and function of qualitative inquiry. One can argue like classical phenomenologists, for example, that the basic task of qualitative research is to study the essential structures of consciousness and human experience. These can be understood theoretically through the use of phenomenology's methods, some scholars will argue. One can also argue, like Brinkmann and Kvale (2015), that the qualitative interview, to focus on one specific method, is a craft (a *techne*) that is ideally learned the way that (other) crafts are learned—that is, through apprenticeship and by observation, imitation, and practice. Finally, one can approach qualitative research from the point of view of *praxis* and *phronesis*. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in such an Aristotelian view of the social sciences (as practical sciences). For example, in their sociological classic *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985) developed what they called “social science as public philosophy.” This perspective accentuated the fact that the researcher is within the society he or she is studying and also within one or more of its moral and political traditions (p. 303). Social science as public philosophy is political in the sense that it is part of the ongoing discussion of the meaning and value of our common life and in that it ideally engages the public. From an Aristotelian position, Flyvbjerg (2001) has argued that the social sciences are—or must become, if they want to matter—*phronetic*. Phronetic researchers place themselves within the political context being studied and focus on the values of the communities by asking three “value-rational” questions: Where are we going? Is this desirable? and What should be done? (p. 60). The *raison d'être* for the social sciences is, Flyvbjerg thinks, developing the value rationality of society—that is, enabling the public to reason better about values. This, I believe, is a very useful approach to the social sciences, but it leaves us again with the political philosophical question: What are values?

I have now introduced some themes and concepts from theoretical philosophy (ontology, metaphysics, and epistemology) and practical philosophy (ethics and political philosophy) and provided some examples of why and how these are very relevant for qualitative research practices. Some qualitative researchers place more emphasis on the former questions (being primarily interested in how their subject matter is constituted), whereas others are more interested in the latter normative questions about which values their research presupposes and implicates. Ideally, a philosophically well-grounded qualitative researcher is able to reflect on all these philosophical dimensions of his or her research practice, and how to do this in qualified ways is a key theme of this book.

Philosophically Informed Analytic Strategies in Qualitative Research

So far, in this chapter, I have provided various definitions of philosophy, and I have emphasized the rather more practical approaches to the discipline, as related to real, living human beings who are engaged in practices of knowing (which Hadot and others have called philosophy as a way of life). I have also introduced the basic subdisciplines of philosophy, and I discussed what qualitative research is. It is clear that no fixed definitions exist of either philosophy or qualitative research. The latter in particular can be approached from many different angles and involves a large number of different analytic strategies. As a way of organizing these different angles and strategies, it might be useful to introduce a distinction from Noblit and Hare's (1988) book on "meta-ethnography" (the art of synthesizing results from different qualitative studies) between different overarching analytic strategies in qualitative research (see Brinkmann, 2012). These strategies also represent significant approaches to qualitative research that are discussed in the following chapters, particular Chapters 3–6. They are the strategies of

- making the hidden obvious;
- making the obvious obvious; and
- making the obvious dubious.

p. 17 In addition to these distinctions from Noblit and Hare, Bjerre (2015) has suggested a fourth analytic category of

- making the hidden dubious.

In order to provide some organization to the philosophies unfolded in the chapters of this book, I suggest that they—with a bit of goodwill—can be seen to incorporate these four general strategies or stances.

Making the hidden obvious is a critical stance that (in qualitative social science) grows out of a critique of positivism (see Chapter 3). It is articulated well within Marxism and critical realism. To criticize is here, for example, to uncover the hidden power structures that regulate human behaviors and influence the politics of human experience. Critical scholars talk about ideologies as systems of thought that work against people's interests, and the point of critical qualitative research is to see through the surface and demonstrate the ideological working mechanisms behind the manifest phenomena. Marx argued that all science would be superfluous if the outward appearance and the essence of things directly coincided (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3). Science is here presented as having the goal of going beyond appearances to critically uncover a truer reality. Although Marx was a German, he worked in Britain for many years, and the whole contemporary movement of critical realism is primarily linked to the United Kingdom, which is why I refer to this as a British tradition in Chapter 3.

Making the obvious obvious is, in a very broad sense, a phenomenological stance that seeks to describe human life and experience (see Chapter 4). In colloquial terms, this stance has the goal of helping us see the trees as a forest and the forest as an array of trees. In qualitative research, this can be much more difficult than it seems, and I appreciate a quote by Pelias (2004) in this context, who argues that what I call a phenomenological stance is really the stance of poetry: "Science is the act of looking at a tree and seeing lumber. Poetry is the act of looking at a tree and seeing a tree" (p. 9). The poet, argues Pelias, is really the one who can see the world clearly as it is, which can be aided by the use of aesthetics (the term *aesthetic* originates from the Greek word for experience). The German traditions of phenomenology and hermeneutics placed emphasis ↴ on description and interpretation of human experience and are therefore, from a bird's-eye perspective, interested in making the obvious in our lives obvious for us, as will be shown in Chapter 4.

p. 18

Making the obvious dubious is a more deconstructive stance that is introduced in Chapter 6 on the French traditions. It implies an attempt to question what we take for granted, not necessarily to uncover hidden mechanisms as in critical realist perspectives but, rather, to show that our meanings and understandings are unstable and endlessly ambiguous. This stance is found in French post-structuralist philosophies, which built upon but also criticized the idea of more stable structures of meaning found in structuralism. The concept of deconstruction was introduced by Derrida as a combination of “destruction” and “construction.” It involves destructing one understanding of a text and opening for construction of other understandings (Norris, 1987). The focus is not on “what really happens” or “the real meaning of what was done” relative to some fixed structure but, rather, on presenting alternative versions of the real. It is affiliated with the “hermeneutics of suspicion” of the critical stance—that is, the idea that things may not be what they seem to be. But it does not search for any underlying genuine or stable meanings hidden beneath a text or an event. Meanings of words are conceived in relation to an infinite and ever-changing network of other words in a language.

Making the hidden dubious is a fourth stance introduced by Bjerre (2015). Unlike the previous stance that takes what we think is true and tries to show that it need not be, the fourth stance implies a critique of the very idea that there are hidden dimensions of meaning behind our common superficial experiences and practices in the first place. Bjerre mentions Nietzschean critiques of religion as examples of how the hidden has been made dubious. Interestingly, we can also mention positivism and its critique of metaphysics here: According to these perspectives, it simply does not make sense to talk about a transcendent realm of gods or ideas behind our lives as lived and experienced (see Chapter 3). Although it may seem a bit unfair (to some pragmatists), I believe it makes sense to say that pragmatism in general incarnates the stance of making the hidden dubious (see Chapter 5). For pragmatists, there are actions and consequences, and our scientific interpretations and explanations should be judged in light of the (beneficial) consequences they enable us to achieve—and not with reference to anything beyond or behind our practical lives. “Nothing is hidden” could be the slogan of this fourth stance, although it is in fact the title of a book about Wittgenstein’s philosophy (Malcolm, 1988). But Wittgenstein and the pragmatists share the idea that language derives its meaning from the ways that concepts are used in practice—which is here for everyone to see in principle—and not from illusory hidden mechanisms or structures. This is addressed in Chapter 5 on American pragmatist traditions in qualitative research.

The critical, phenomenological, post-structural, and pragmatist stances are naturally not confined to their own birthplaces or traditions (I mean the traditions of critical theory and critical realism; phenomenology and hermeneutics; deconstruction; and pragmatism), although these schools of thought tend to cultivate such specific perspectives. Obviously, a phenomenologist can be critical and even deconstructive, and vice versa, so here I use the terms more generally to point to analytic strategies or stances that may be useful to bear in mind when one works as a philosophically informed qualitative researcher. The logic of one’s study, and the way one presents and analyzes the material, may differ relative to one’s interest in making the hidden obvious, the obvious obvious, the obvious dubious, or the hidden dubious. However, in Chapters 3–6, I deal with the four traditions in turn (each of which embodies several different traditions) relative to their geographical birthplaces: the British, the German, the French, and the American. But first, I present a brief overview of the history of philosophy in Chapter 2 to provide some historical context to the ensuing discussions.