

Axio-Onto-Epistemology in Systemic Practice

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Abstract

This paper explores the inter/intra-connectedness of axiology, ontology, and epistemology as lived experiences. It emphasises their profound impact on academic inquiry, practice and everyday human existence. I argue that Axiology, the study of values and value-based judgements, serves as the pulse of human experience, shaping our moral choices, aesthetic appreciation, and interpersonal relationships, to mention a few. Ontology provides the solid foundation on which we construct our understanding of existence, while epistemology acts as the guiding light, directing how we acquire and interpret knowledge. Using the work of several key philosophers such as Kant, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Sartre, and Barad, this paper engages with the concept of axio-onto-epistemology to demonstrate how the inter/intra-connectedness of the three shapes human thoughts and interactions. As Dewey (1939) argued, Axiology is not an abstract construct but an evolving lived experience that manifests in the ethical dilemmas, cultural frameworks, and social structures that define our realities. Through the lens of axio-onto-epistemology, our existence is grounded in relational and experiential realities while simultaneously inviting us to critically examine the ways we come to know and make sense of the world. Rather than treating ontology and epistemology as separate domains, this integrated perspective encourages systemic practitioners to map the values they hold dear, question their ways of knowing, and attend to the ethical tensions that reveal deeper ontological assumptions. This paper argues that axio-onto-epistemology is not merely a theoretical framework but a reflexive, evolving process that influences systemic practice. Reflexivity, the conscious examination of one's beliefs and biases, emerges as a key component in navigating the tensions between these philosophical perspectives. The paper also draws on Barad's (2007) concept of ethico-onto-epistemology, arguing that axiology should have a more central role in philosophical discourse. While Barad highlights the ethical implications of our participation in the world, this paper emphasises individual agency in shaping values and meaning. Ultimately, this exploration underlines the transformative potential of axio-onto-epistemology, showing how it functions as a guiding framework for intent-

ional and informed engagement with the world. By embracing these interconnected philosophies, individuals and practitioners can develop deeper awareness, adaptability, and ethical responsibility in their personal and professional lives.

Axiology and Ethics: Complementary But Distinct

Axiology and ethics are often seen as overlapping areas of philosophy because both involve values and judgments. However, in practical systems, it is important to recognise how axiology adds a complementary yet distinct dimension to our reflective work. While ethics typically addresses questions of right and wrong, responsibility, fairness, and moral duty, particularly within established frameworks such as professional ethical guidelines, axiology takes a broader and deeper view of these concepts. It focuses on what we value, why we value it, and how values influence our understanding of meaning, beauty, worth, and significance in both relational and systemic contexts (Bayles, 1967; Dewey, 1939; Anderson, 2024). For example, while ethics might guide a therapist to uphold boundaries, axiology encourages us to consider why those boundaries matter, whose values are being protected, and what value conflicts might emerge in the process.

What Axiology Adds That Ethics Does Not

Axiology invites a deliberate inquiry into:

- What is meaningful or valuable in a given situation, not only what is “right” or “allowed”.
- How personal, cultural, spiritual, or aesthetic values influence our perceptions and choices (Brentano, cited in Huemer, 2019).
- How value hierarchies and value conflicts manifest within systemic contexts (Scheler, cited in Gunawan, 2021).

It offers space for both intrinsic and instrumental values, allowing practitioners to regard beauty, presence, patience, and silence as meaningful acts rather than just ethical neutralities or rules to follow. Axiology also encourages aesthetic sensitivity and intentionality, which are often missing in more rule-based ethical reasoning.

In short, axiology supports reflexive depth beyond ethical compliance. It adds colour, tone, and rhythm to the binary structure of ethical codes.

Practice Example

I once worked with a teenage client who had been referred for anger and oppositional behaviours at school. During our early sessions, she often arrived late, stayed silent for long periods, and made minimal eye contact. According to standard ethical procedures, after a certain point of non-attendance or disengagement, the therapist might consider ending the sessions or setting stricter attendance boundaries to maintain professional standards and resource use (BACP, 2018).

Nevertheless, my axiological stance prompted me to examine more closely. I valued presence over performance, and attunement over productivity. I believed that something profoundly valuable was

occurring in our shared silences, that trust was being negotiated not through dialogue, but through my willingness to wait, without pressure.

Rather than strictly enforcing cancellation policies, I chose to honour the significance of her silent presence, remaining receptive to the idea that this might be her way of testing safety and relational stability. This choice was not about relaxing ethical standards but about embracing what I valued: relational patience, quiet dignity, and an attentive, non-demanding presence. Over time, the client began to speak, initially hesitantly, then more freely, sharing stories of abandonment and unspoken grief.

That experience confirmed that axiological awareness influenced my responses in ways ethical codes could not prescribe. Ethics guided my fundamental sense of care and professional duty. Axiology showed what was worth holding onto, even when it meant resisting pressure to act solely based on efficiency or measurable results.

This captures the essence of axio-onto-epistemology in practice. It prompts us to continually ask not only “what is the right thing to do?” but also “what is the good, meaningful, beautiful, and valuable thing to do? How can we be present in this moment?” In doing so, we participate in a form of values-based attunement that remains critically aware of ethics but is grounded in something more lived and embodied: the pulse of what truly matters.

Barad and Ontological Differences

Karen Barad’s concept of ethico-onto-epistemology (2007) has been pivotal in shifting systemic and philosophical thought towards a more entangled, intra-active ontology. Barad, drawing on quantum physics, feminist theory, and post-structuralist epistemologies, argues that ethics, ontology, and epistemology are inseparable, co-constituted through phenomena rather than pre-existing categories. Her concept of intra-action challenges the notion of discrete, autonomous individuals, instead focusing on the entangled processes that give rise to relational becoming. Barad’s framework builds on agential realism, where material-discursive practices configure reality through iterative boundary-making processes known as “agential cuts” (Barad, 2003, p.815).

However, this paper positions itself within a social constructionist ontology, aligned with thinkers such as Gergen (2009), Shotter (1993), and Anderson and Goolishian (1988), which emphasises that meaning is constructed through dialogue, cultural norms, and human reflexivity. Although also relational, this perspective maintains a crucial role for intentional agency and self-reflective inquiry in the process of meaning-making. In contrast to Barad’s flat ontology, which rejects hierarchical distinctions between human and non-human, subject and object, the social constructionist stance permits relational hierarchies, conversational ethics, and embodied reflexive accountability (Simon and Salter, 2019).

The axio-onto-epistemological approach I suggest incorporates Barad’s insight that we are always embedded in relational-ethical webs. However, it also emphasises the agentic capacity of individuals to shape, contest, and reflect on values and knowledge. This diverges from Barad’s focus on ethics as an ontological condition and introduces axiology as a domain of intentional valuing. Axiology provides a deliberate perspective: What do we choose to value? Why do we value it? Whose values influence our understanding and actions? These questions draw attention not only to ethical entanglements but also to reflective, value-based discernment.

Barad rightly argues that ethics cannot be separated from being or knowing; we are always already ethically implicated. However, axiology prompts us to consider which values influence that ethical implication. Axiology enhances systemic practice by embedding value reflexivity within therapeutic and organisational contexts, enabling a more nuanced engagement with diversity, power, and cultural complexity (Burnham, 2012; hooks, 1994).

Moreover, the inclusion of axiological awareness supports relational ethics not only as a condition of entanglement but as an evolving practice of intentional attunement. This is particularly important in pluralistic and intercultural settings, where values are multiple, contested, and co-negotiated. In therapeutic practice, for instance, Simon (2024), building on the foundational work of Spivak (1988) and Dotson (2011), notes that unexamined theoretical values can impose epistemic violence, silencing or distorting the lived realities of those positioned as 'other'. Axiological reflexivity offers tools to deconstruct and ethically reposition these dynamics, inviting practitioners to map and critically interrogate the values embedded in their ways of knowing and being.

Barad's ethic-onto-epistemology emphasises that we cannot escape ethical responsibility and that intentionality is not pre-determined and individual but is co-enacted and emergent. In contrast, axio-onto-epistemology tells us that we can and must engage with ethical responsibility consciously and contextually. Our agency may be relationally situated, but it remains a force for shaping meaning. Barad's theory contributes significantly to dismantling binaries and centring entanglement. Yet, the axio-onto-epistemological stance focuses our attention on the centring of values and the intentional use of agency as part of systemic reflexivity.

This different perspective does not oppose Barad's insights but enriches them with a practitioner lens grounded in lived, relational experience. It offers systemic practitioners a vocabulary for engaging with ethical dilemmas not merely as entanglements to acknowledge but as invitations to enact value-informed, culturally responsive, and power-aware interventions.

Ontology as Solid Ground

Ontology, derived from the Greek word *ontos* (being) and *logos* (discourse), refers to the philosophical study of the nature of being, existence, and reality. In systemic practice, ontology is not merely abstract theorising; it is the foundational grounding through which we understand our presence, our relationships, and our engagements with the world. It shapes the assumptions we hold about what is real, what counts as existence, and how beings, including systems, are constituted.

Martin Heidegger's work, particularly his concept of *Dasein* or "being-there," has been influential in situating human existence as fundamentally relational and interpretive (Heidegger, 1962). For Heidegger, ontology is inseparable from lived experience and is concerned with the fundamental question of what it means to be. Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist ontology also emphasises individual freedom and the belief that "existence precedes essence", that we define ourselves through actions and choices rather than through any fixed identity (Sartre, 1943). These ontological stances offer profound implications for systemic practitioners who work with clients navigating identity, agency, and meaning.

Ontology is not a static set of beliefs, but rather it is co-constructed and situated. Crotty (1998) suggests that ontology deals with "what is," and asks whether there is a reality independent of our

knowledge of it. This debate between realism (an objective world existing independently of human perception) and relativism or social constructionism (social processes shape reality) is central in qualitative research and systemic therapy (Ormston et al., 2014; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

Systemic practitioners often align with a constructionist or relational ontology, one that acknowledges that meaning and reality emerge through relationships and conversation (Gergen, 2009; Shotter, 1993). From this view, family systems, cultural frameworks, and therapeutic change are not external realities to be discovered, but realities to be co-created. This perspective enables practitioners to ask: *What is this system's understanding of itself? What is being privileged or silenced in this construction of reality?* It leads us to understand our clients not as fixed identities but as dynamic beings-in-relation.

Ontology also shapes how change is understood in systemic work. For example, a realist ontology may encourage problem-solving models where issues are fixed and diagnosable, while a constructionist ontology supports dialogical and narrative approaches that view change as arising from co-created understandings (Anderson and Goolishian, 1988; Tomm, 1987; Andersen, 1991; McNamee and Gergen, 1992; Shotter, 1993). This aligns with the second-order cybernetics of Heinz von Foerster (1974), who argued that practitioners are part of the system and therefore influence the reality being described.

Additionally, ontological assumptions influence how practitioners approach issues of diversity, justice, and power. Burnham (2012) emphasises the importance of ontological reflexivity to reveal the hidden assumptions we bring into therapeutic contexts, particularly concerning race, class, gender, and ability. Similar views have been expressed by authors such as Hoffman (2002), McNamee and Gergen (1992), Shotter (2011), and Anderson (1997), who all stress the significance of recognising our stance as lived, embodied, situated, and constantly provisional and open to revision. In this paper's framework of axio-onto-epistemology, ontology functions as the "solid ground," not because it provides certainty, but because it creates a space to pose fundamental questions: Who am I within this system? What defines being and belonging here? How do we interpret the nature of this difficulty? In doing so, ontology grounds our inquiry while remaining sensitive to complexity and emergence.

Ontology is not just an abstract concept; it is alive in every interaction. It manifests in the silences we choose the questions we dare to ask, and the assumptions we are willing to gently challenge. As Wittgenstein (1922, proposition 7) reminds us, "whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." In systemic practice, this kind of ontological awareness encourages us to remain with the unspoken and attune ourselves to the quiet architectures of being that influence how we engage with one another. Michopoulou (2022) eloquently adds to this, urging us to recognise the sense of "we-ness" and the shared, often invisible, threads of connection linking us. Incorporating thinkers like Heidegger, Sartre, and Crotty, as well as voices such as Michopoulou's, helps us translate this sensitivity into more honest, relational, and responsive practice.

Epistemology as the Light Unto My Path

Epistemology, from the Greek *epistēmē* (knowledge) and *logos* (discourse), is the philosophical inquiry into the nature, origin, scope, and validity of knowledge. In systemic practice, epistemology influences how we understand what constitutes knowledge, how it is acquired, and who is authorised to produce

and validate it. As a “light unto my path,” epistemology does not merely illuminate knowledge; it reveals the reflexive processes by which knowledge becomes actionable in relational contexts.

Historically, epistemology has been shaped by two major traditions: rationalism, which posits that knowledge is derived from reason and innate ideas, and empiricism, which argues that knowledge arises from sensory experience. Philosophers like Descartes, Kant, and Leibniz exemplify rationalist thought (Adams, 1975; Vanzo, 2013), while Locke, Berkeley, and Hume advanced empiricist positions (Boyle, 2009; Berkeley, 1975).

These dual traditions shaped the evolution of modern science and education. However, for systemic and qualitative practitioners, epistemology is not confined to reason or experience alone. It is fundamentally relational and constructed. From a constructionist viewpoint, knowledge emerges within relationships, conversations, and cultural-historical contexts (Gergen, 2009; Shotter, 1993). What we “know” is always provisional, dialogical, and context-dependent.

In systemic practice, epistemology is deeply shaped by second-order cybernetics (von Foerster, 1974), which reminds us that we are not standing outside the systems we describe; we are part of them. This challenges the idea of detached objectivity and emphasises that knowledge grows through shared, reflexive conversations (McNamee and Gergen, 1992; Hoffman, 2002). Michopoulou (2019) also encourages us to bring in playfulness and a lightness of touch, highlighting that practitioners are not distant experts but fellow humans co-creating meaning moment by moment (Anderson and Goolishian, 1988). Additionally, Gail Simon (2024) advances this further by highlighting the ideological embeddedness of therapeutic theories. She urges practitioners to critically reflect on how their knowledge claims carry value assumptions and how these can be re-authorised through collaborative, client-centred dialogue. This reflexive awareness, what Simon terms “ideology in action”, is a cornerstone of epistemological integrity.

Epistemology in systemic practice is also concerned with power, inclusion, and knowledge justice. As feminist and decolonial thinkers like Harding (1993), hooks (1994), and Mignolo (2011) argue, dominant epistemologies have historically silenced marginalised voices. A reflexive epistemology asks: Whose knowledge is centred? Whose voices are excluded? What epistemic violence might we be complicit in?

Karen Barad (2007), through her theory of *agential realism*, reframes epistemology not as a detached process of observation, but as a material-discursive entanglement, we know *with and through* the world, not from outside it. Knowledge becomes an ethical and ontological entanglement, inseparable from the conditions and actions through which it arises.

In the axio-onto-epistemological framework I propose, epistemology is not a passive mirror but an active, value-laden path that we walk with others. It invites systemic practitioners to:

- Honour multiple truths and lived experiences.
- Embrace uncertainty and provisional knowing.
- Attend to the reflexive processes that shape meaning.
- Hold space for knowledge as emotional, embodied, and political.

The “epistemological light” is not linear. It is flickering, diffused, sometimes dimmed by the shadows of history, privilege, and trauma. Yet it guides us toward compassion, toward complexity, and co-created understanding.

By adopting a relational and reflexive epistemology, systemic practitioners can engage more ethically and responsively with the people and systems they support. In doing so, we move beyond knowledge *about* people toward knowledge *with* people, a transformative knowing that illuminates not only what is, but also what could become. Thus, a relational and reflexive epistemology explores both rationalist and empiricist traditions, as well as social constructionist ideas and systemic co-construction. It also reflects on how knowledge is formed through lived experience and interaction.

Inter/Intra-Connectedness of Axio-Onto-Epistemology

This invites us to look at the bigger picture, where knowing, valuing, and being meet. The concept of axio-onto-epistemology offers a dynamic and integrative framework through which systemic practitioners can understand how values (axiology), being (ontology), and knowing (epistemology) are reflexively and relationally intertwined. Rather than viewing these as separate domains, this approach reveals their continuous mutual influence, both *between* each other (*inter-connectedness*) and *within* each practitioner’s internal reflections and systemic engagements (*intra-connectedness*).

The distinction between *inter* and *intra* is central here. Inter-connectedness refers to the visible, relational interplay among the three domains as they shape one another in systemic practice. For example, how one’s values influence their understanding of knowledge, or how epistemological assumptions impact one’s ontological commitments. Intra-connectedness, on the other hand, speaks to the internal, often less visible movements within the self, how one’s lived experiences, contradictions, tensions, and transformations shape how they value, perceive, and know (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, 2025).

Simon and Salter (2019) explore this through their concept of “transmaterial worlding,” describing how human and non-human forms are engaged in ongoing processes of intra-becoming. Similarly, Barad (2007) speaks of intra-actions, where phenomena emerge not in isolation but within entangled relations. Shotter (2011) and Haraway (2016) further emphasise how our internal landscapes are continually co-shaped through our interactions with others and the world.

My framework builds on these ideas by introducing intentionality and agency through axiology. While Barad’s entanglement implies ethical responsibility as an inherent state, axio-onto-epistemology invites us to step into that responsibility consciously and reflexively, holding space for choice, values, and relational accountability.

This dance of reflexive co-construction is vividly present in systemic work. For example, a practitioner may hold a value (axiology) of collaboration, which informs how they understand the family system (ontology) and the tools they use to engage with it (epistemology). This same practitioner may, through reflexive practice, discover tensions between personal values and those of a client, thereby revisiting their own assumptions and reconfiguring their practice.

Such movement is neither linear nor static. It mirrors what Burnham (2012) describes as navigating the visible-invisible and voiced-unvoiced dimensions of practice. Our sense of being is shaped by what

we value, and our ways of knowing emerge from this dynamic interplay between values and existence. This fluid interplay is especially critical in multicultural, power-sensitive contexts, where ontological assumptions and epistemological frameworks must be attuned to local values and culturally embedded practices (Mignolo, 2011).



Figure 1: Adapted from my Progression Point 2 doctoral paper (Anumah, 2024)

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This visual diagram in Figure 1, which I presented in my doctoral research, represents this interplay through an octagonal shape, with each side illustrating a directional connection between axiology, ontology, and epistemology, and the self, where intra-connected reflection takes place. The arrows signify not static relations, but a *murmuration*, an image inspired by starlings in flight, to emphasise fluidity, relational responsiveness, and movement through complexity.

In practice, axio-onto-epistemological awareness asks systemic practitioners to:

- Map the values influencing their understanding of systemic realities.
- Surface how their ways of knowing are culturally and relationally situated.
- Attend to moments where ethical dilemmas reveal ontological tensions.
- Engage with reflexivity not as a methodological add-on, but as a lived philosophical stance.

Ultimately, this integrated framework encourages a shift from compartmentalised thinking to relational responsiveness. It provides a rich philosophical grounding for practitioners to hold multiple truths, navigate complexity, and respond with ethical and value-informed intentionality across all domains of their work. It explains the diagrammatic model of intra- and inter-connectedness and provides interpretive insight into how values, knowledge, and existence mutually influence each other in lived experience and systemic practice.

Practice-Based Illustrations

To bring axio-onto-epistemology into sharper focus, I offer several vignettes drawn from my therapeutic practice that illuminate how values, ontology, and epistemology operate reflexively in real-world interactions. These examples move us beyond theoretical explanation and demonstrate the lived, ethical, and situated choices that systemic practitioners face.

1. Waiting in the Silence

In a community support group for care-experienced young adults, some participants repeatedly arrived late, rarely contributed verbally, and seemed disengaged. A conventional lens might interpret this as a lack of commitment or motivation, warranting stricter attendance policies or structured participation demands.

Holding a value of invitational presence, I viewed attendance itself as a meaningful act of tentative belonging. Ontologically, I recognised these young adults as navigating complex histories of trust, belonging, and identity. Epistemologically, I understood that knowledge and connection in this context would unfold through shared activities, storytelling, and symbolic gestures rather than direct discussion alone.

Gradually, some participants began sharing small stories and creating artwork that expressed their experiences of silence and survival. Here, axio-onto-epistemology guided my choice to privilege slow, relational attunement over outcome-driven expectations, allowing genuine connection to emerge on its own terms.

2. Values Clash in Cross-Cultural Therapy

A couple from a culturally conservative background arrived for therapy after disagreements over their daughter's sexual orientation. The father cited religious values, while the daughter emphasised personal authenticity. Rather than privileging one perspective, I engaged both using axiological reflexivity, surfacing the *hierarchies of value* each held. This included an exploration of what was being protected or feared.

My ontological commitment was to multiplicity, that multiple realities coexist. Epistemologically, I treated each worldview as valid knowledge. I facilitated a dialogue where difference was not treated as a deficit but as a potential. This allowed the family to narrate a shared experience of fear, loss, and love underneath the ideological tension. Axio-onto-epistemological awareness enabled me to honour both stability and transformation.

Epistemic Injustice and Naming Power

In supervision, a trainee expressed feeling "impostor syndrome" after a client had challenged their methods. The trainee, a woman of colour, had been taught primarily Eurocentric frameworks. Together, we reflected on whose knowledge systems were being centred.

Using axio-onto-epistemology, we named the epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; Dotson, 2011; Medina, 2013) at play, making visible the silences and distortions imposed on certain knowers and inviting a more relational and reflexive engagement with their stories. Her discomfort was not a lack

of competence, but a collision of ontologies. We explored how she might integrate her cultural traditions of storytelling and community healing as valid sources of knowing.

This reframing empowered her to reclaim her voice. Axiology surfaced what she valued, relational dignity, narrative witnessing, and epistemology became an embodied practice rooted in her lived experience. This story illustrates how power and knowledge intersect and how systemic practice can disrupt dominant narratives through reflexive action.

These vignettes demonstrate that axio-onto-epistemology is not an abstract philosophy but can be described as a lived methodology. It shapes how we sit in the therapy room, how we listen, how we speak, and how we relate to complexity. It allows practitioners to move beyond mere technique toward intentional, relational, and just ways of being with others. These examples illustrate the difference between ethical compliance and value-conscious responsiveness.

Final Reflections and Conclusion

This paper has presented axio-onto-epistemology as a reflexive, integrated framework for understanding the intertwined nature of values, existence, and knowledge in systemic practice. It responds to Barad's (2007) ethico-onto-epistemology by affirming that ethics alone does not fully account for the role of agency, intentionality, and lived values in shaping how we relate, understand, and act. Axiology, as I have argued throughout, brings depth and nuance to systemic reflexivity by foregrounding what we value, why we value it, and how these values inform the way we construct meaning and reality.

Ontology, framed as the solid ground, has reminded us that being is not a fixed state but an emergent process, shaped through relationships, culture, history, and reflexivity. It prompts us to ask how we present ourselves in our worlds and how our assumptions about reality influence our interactions with clients, communities, and systems. Epistemology, the light unto our path, is guiding our attention to the multiplicity of truths and the conditions through which knowledge becomes recognised. It has shown us that knowing is both political and poetic. A product of dialogue, silence, and shared becoming.

The integration of these domains through axio-onto-epistemology invites systemic practitioners to engage in an ongoing dance of awareness. This involves navigating the tensions between cultural difference and ethical commitment, between theoretical knowledge and lived complexity, between agency and entanglement. These are not problems to be solved but spaces to be held, explored, and lived into.

The practice-based vignettes illustrated how this framework can support therapists in honouring silence, navigating cultural conflict, and naming epistemic injustice. Each example reflected how value-conscious, relationally attuned, and reflexively aware engagements foster deeper connection and more ethical, co-constructed possibilities.

The paper revisits tensions between Barad's notion of agency being a matter of intra-acting and the author's value-based agency. It affirms that axio-onto-epistemology is both a theoretical lens and a lived reality, offering tools for systemic sensitivity and meaningful engagement.

Ultimately, axio-onto-epistemology is not simply a philosophy or theory. It is a stance, a commitment to living and working with intentionality, humility, and critical awareness. It recognises that our values are not separate from our knowing or being; they are what bind us to others and the world. It reminds us that reflexivity is not a static skill, but an evolving relational practice, a practice of care, resistance, and creative hope.

As we move forward in our work as practitioners, researchers, and educators, may we do so with greater attentiveness to what we hold dear, how we understand the world, and how we shape the futures we are co-authoring. Let us walk with light, grounded in our becoming, and aware of the values that guide our path.

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