THE PAST IN THE PRESENT: PHILOSOPHY AND ITS HISTORY

As in the foregoing parts of the chapter, the histories that philosophers tell of their own discipline often emphasize the respects in which the new theory is destructive of the old. This of course, is natural and even helpful, for understanding the problems of the past that the next theory attempts to rectify provides valuable insight into the nature of the successor theory. Nonetheless, this way of recounting the history of philosophy runs the risk of grossly underemphasizing the seriousness philosophy accords its history. It does not view its history as merely of value as a record of ideas permanently supplanted—a sort of museum of mistakes of the past. Rather, it returns to its history for a variety of intellectual fruits. Sometimes it does serve as a cautionary tale of mistakes best not repeated, but no less often it serves as a source of insight and innovation, clarification and challenge. Perhaps in philosophy more than any other discipline, the figures of the past are active participants who influence the current of contemporary thought even though they are separated from philosophy’s present practitioners by centuries and, sometimes, even millennia.

The following essay by Nathaniel Goldberg is an excellent illustration of the positive role philosophy’s history can exert on its present. After explaining Quine’s holisms and his commitment to the possibility of multiple conceptual schemes, Goldberg explains Donald Davidson’s argument to show that there can be no such thing as a conceptual scheme. With these preliminaries in place, Goldberg then proceeds to show that Davidson’s arguments against the possibility of a conceptual scheme might be pushed in a roughly Kantian direction. Instead of taking his arguments to show what Davidson intended (there can be no such thing as a conceptual scheme), Goldberg contends that they might be used to show that there can be only one conceptual scheme. (Recall Kant’s belief that the forms of sensibility and the categories of the understanding are necessary conditions for human beings to perceive and understand the world; therefore, Kant believed that there could be only one conceptual scheme for human beings.) Having given this neo-Kantian turn to Davidson’s arguments, Goldberg merges this possibility with Quine’s holism and proposes for consideration a new epistemology he calls “monoschematic holism.” By thus engaging Kant (1724–1804), Quine (1908–2000), and Davidson (1917–2003) in philosophical conversation, Goldberg synthesizes the representationalist tradition with the pragmatist tradition to fashion an epistemological theory that may be unprecedented in the history of philosophy. Thus it is that in addition to being an excellent example of the positive role that philosophy’s history often plays in its present development, Goldberg’s essay may be an example of philosophical history in the making.

Nathaniel Goldberg: Where Does Knowledge Come From? Quine, Davidson, and Traditional Epistemology

Where do our various knowledge claims come from? Rationalists like Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz argue that all substantive knowledge claims derive from reason. Empiricists like Locke, Berkeley, and Hume declare that all such claims derive from experience. Kant maintains that some knowledge claims, like those in mathematics and what he calls “pure natural science,” derive from reason, while those about the world derive from the interanimation of reason and experience.

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Two American philosophers have recently challenged the very idea of asking
where our various knowledge claims come from. Willard van Orman Quine
(1908–2000) insists that it is wrong to ask about the source of any such claims in
isolation from one another. We must be epistemic holists and ask about knowledge in
total. We can then realize that the human contribution (what had traditionally been
called "reason") and the empirical contribution ("experience") to knowledge are
always combined. The challenge made by Donald Davidson (1917–2003), Quine's
student, is even more radical. Not only is Davidson an epistemic holist. He also
contends that the notion of human and empirical contributions to knowledge is itself
unintelligible. Knowledge does not come from anywhere. Nonetheless it can still be
about the world, of which we are a part.

Coming to grips with Quine's and Davidson's positions is of paramount impor-
tance to epistemology. If either is correct, then Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke,
Berkeley, Hume, and Kant are all incorrect. But Quine's and Davidson's conse-
quences are more far-reaching still. If Quine is right, then knowledge has to be
reimagined, because all that we know turns out to be based partly on experience.
Arithmetic and archeology are both empirical disciplines. If Davidson is right, then
the theory of knowledge has to be reimagined. If knowledge has no sources—if it is
simply about the world, without having anything to do with reason or experience—
then the subject matter of much epistemology has vanished.

Our aim will be to consider some of Quine's and Davidson's arguments.
Nothing less than how we are to imagine knowledge, and the theory of knowledge,
hang in the balance.

1. Quine's Arguments

Though he challenges traditional empiricism, rationalism, and Kantianism alike,
Quine follows many contemporary philosophers by talking not about "reason" as
some mysterious faculty but about "language" as some behaviorally observable phe-
nomenon. Reason and experience become for Quine language and experience. As
such, Quine gives arguments meant to show that the traditional project of locating
sources for knowledge claims, construed as sentences, is bankrupt. His most famous
arguments concern the alleged tenability of maintaining that some sentences are
true merely in virtue of language. Quine purports to show that there are no such
sentences.\textsuperscript{1} Nonetheless, even if Quine is right, and every sentence does depend for
its truth on language and experience, this does not show that language and experience fail to contribute to the truth of knowledge claims individually. In other words,
even if Quine's arguments against there being sentences true merely in virtue of language succeed, he has not thereby established epistemic holism. Conversely, holism would
itself lead one to reject the existence of sentences true merely in virtue of language.
So holism is the stronger view. Quine argues for it by examining how scientific
hypotheses are tested.\textsuperscript{2}

Consider how Quine would handle the following example. Suppose that we are
testing the hypothesis that objects near the earth's surface accelerate at a rate of
9.8 m/s\textsuperscript{2}. We ascend to the 20th floor of a building, find a window, release an object
from it, and time its decent to the ground. Then we measure the distance between
the center of the object when released to its center when it hits, and divide by the
square of the time that it took to hit. That should provide the object's rate of ac-
celeration. Instead of 9.8 m/s², however, suppose that we calculate 9.0 m/s².

What should we do? Quine contends that in principle we have unlimited lati-
tude in explaining why our calculation was off. We could argue that air resistance or
temperature slowed the rate of acceleration. We could argue that our formula for cal-
culating acceleration was incorrect. We could argue that a nonphysical demon
slowed the rate of acceleration. We could argue that the rules of arithmetic that we
employed to make the calculations were incorrect. We could even argue that 9.8 m/s²
and 9.0 m/s² are not incompatibe values. In other words, we could allow that
9.8 m/s² and some value that is not 9.8 m/s² could both be the rate of acceleration!
This would be to reject a cardinal law of logic, the law of non-contradiction.

Of course we would more likely take into consideration things like air resistance
than we would call into question rules of arithmetic and logic. But Quine's point is
that when faced with an observation that resists fitting in with our total theory of the
world, we can revise any part of that total theory to make it fit. Quine deduces from
this that "the unit of empirical significance is the whole of science." When we evalu-
ate any prediction about the world, we are ultimately testing every claim that we hold
true, whether the claim concerns logic, mathematics, physical theory, or observations.
Even logic and mathematics are then sensitive to experience.

Quine concludes that the sources of all our knowledge are double: there is the
way that we think, incorporated into our language, and there are the sensory stimu-
lations that we experience, which we use language to formulate into knowledge
claims. Tracing the contribution that language and experience make to individual
sentences is a mistake.

2. Evaluating Quine's Argument

Quine is correct. Logic and mathematics, on the one hand, and physical theory and
observation, on the other, are mutually dependent on each other, and on language
and experience in turn. Moreover, the history of science itself supports this. In the
seventeenth century, Isaac Newton presupposed the claims of Euclidean geometry
when he accounted for the movement of physical objects. (Euclidean geometry is the
geometry studied in high school; it maintains, among other things, that parallel lines
do not meet.) In the twentieth century, Albert Einstein presupposed the claims of
Riemannian geometry when he accounted for the same. (Riemannian geometry dif-
fers from Euclidean precisely by maintaining that parallel lines do meet.) Now this is
key. Because Einstein better accounted for observations of Mercury's movement
around the Sun than did Newton, scientists rejected Euclidean and accepted
Riemannian geometry as explanatory of the world. Mathematical systems, even the
properties of parallel lines, are thus sensitive to empirical results.

Quine himself provides an example meant to illustrate how experience impacts
logic also. Quine maintains that certain consequences of quantum mechanics seem
best explained by claiming that a photon can be both a particle and not a particle
simultaneously. This is akin to our scientist above who could argue that 9.8 m/s² and
not 9.8 m/s² are both the rate of acceleration. Here empirical results might encourage
scientists to revise logic itself. The truth or falsity of logical claims, like the law of non-contradiction, depends on what we observe in the world.

Considerations such as these show that it does make no sense to speak about human and empirical contributions to knowledge claims in isolation from one another. Mathematics, logic, and all the rest are part of our total theory of the world, each part of which impacts all the others. Now, recall, Davidson maintains that it makes no sense to speak about contributions to knowledge in the first place. We consider Davidson’s arguments next.

3. Davidson’s Argument

Rather than “reason” or “language,” Davidson calls the alleged human contribution to knowledge a “conceptual scheme.” Rather than “experience,” Davidson calls the alleged empirical contribution “empirical content.” Nonetheless in Quinean spirit Davidson understands conceptual schemes linguistically; “we may identify conceptual schemes with languages . . ., or better, allowing for the possibility that more than one language may express the same scheme, sets of intertranslatable languages.”

Davidson’s arguments against the intelligibility of speaking about sources of knowledge amount to arguments against the intelligibility of distinguishing conceptual scheme from empirical content. To show that scheme–content dualism is unintelligible, Davidson asks what would count as evidence for the dualism. What would?

One answer would be drastic disagreement in the knowledge claims that different human beings make in the same empirical settings. We could then say that the disagreement came from each applying her own conceptual scheme to the same empirical content. But what would be evidence of that? We cannot read one another’s minds. We can, however, talk to one another. By analyzing our descriptions of the world, differences in conceptual schemes (if there are any) should become manifest. Here Davidson’s linguistic understanding of conceptual schemes comes in handy. If claims that you make in your language cannot be translated into claims that I make in mine, or vice versa, then each of us has a conceptual scheme that subsumes empirical content relative to our own way of conceiving of the world. Davidson thus maintains that the test for the intelligibility of scheme–content dualism is the possibility of non-intertranslatable languages. His strategy is to show that such non-intertranslatability is impossible.

Davidson considers two kinds of non-intertranslatability: complete and partial. Here is what he says about complete. Davidson suggests two ways of explaining how scheme and content interact generally. On the one hand, the scheme, understood as a language, can organize (or “categorize,” “systematize,” or “divide up”) empirical content. On the other hand, it can fit (or “predict,” “account for,” or “face the tribunal of”) such content. Neither, he maintains, can establish the possibility of complete non-intertranslatability. Consider each in turn.

Davidson contends that a language can only “organize” something already containing objects. When one organizes a closet, one organizes shoes, shirts, and boxes. The process of organizing entails that the thing to be organized is already individuated into parts. Hence, if a language can organize empirical content, then that content must already be individuated also. But individuation requires a principle by which parts are
separated out, and such a principle would involve or be a concept. In fact, Davidson observes, a conceptual scheme is itself meant to individuate empirical content. Conceptualization is the alleged means by which it does so. But therein lies the problem. Understanding conceptualization as organization presupposes that empirical content is already individuated, which, by hypothesis, only conceptualization itself could do. So for a conceptual scheme to organize empirical content that content must already both be and not be individuated—which is a logical contradiction.7 Davidson concludes that because of this contradiction, understanding language as organizing empirical content cannot provide any evidence of completely non-intertranslatable languages.

The other way that language, understood as a conceptual scheme, might interact with its empirical content is by fitting it. What would this mean? Davidson decides that a language fits its empirical content only if it is true of that content. Now there are many ways to understand truth. Davidson appeals to the least controversial, Alfred Tarski’s semantic conception of truth.8 Tarski presupposes that we already have a pre-theoretical understanding of translation. He then defines truth in terms of it. Basically Tarski maintains that the concept of truth in a language is exhausted by the total set of T-sentences constructible from that language. T-sentences have this form:

\[(T) \quad s \text{ is true in a language if and only if } p.\]

Where \(s\) is a sentence in the language being studied, and \(p\) is the translation of that sentence in the language being used to study it. Suppose that Spanish is the language being studied and English is the language used to study it. This would then be one T-sentence:

\[(T_1) \quad “La nieve es blanca” is true in Spanish if and only if snow is white.\]

By identifying each \(s\) with its translation \(p\), the totality of T-sentences for a language captures what it is for any sentence to be true in that language. It tells us what truth in that language is.

What does appealing to Tarski accomplish? Recall that the idea of a conceptual scheme’s “fitting” empirical content was supposed to explain the possibility of complete failure of inter-translatability. Now, according to Davidson, since “fitting” is best understood as implicating truth, which itself implicates translatability, claiming that conceptual schemes “fit” their empirical content cannot provide any evidence of completely non-intertranslatable languages. We have no way of making scheme-content dualism intelligible here either.

Davidson’s argument against the possibility of complete non-intertranslatability is controversial. Later we shall evaluate it and Davidson’s argument against the possibility of partial non-intertranslatability together. Here we should consider his argument against the possibility of the partial variety instead. Davidson begins by asking what would be required for us to interpret a language about which we know nothing. He responds that we would need to be able to recognize the conditions under which each sentence that a speaker of that language could utter are true. Recognizing any old truth conditions, however, is insufficient. “La nieve es blanca” is true in Spanish whenever any of the following conditions obtain: snow is white, New York has
skyscrapers, $1 + 1 = 2$, etc. To interpret “La nieve es blanca,” we need to recognize not just any conditions under which it is true in Spanish; we need to recognize conditions reflective of what is happening in the world when our speaker utters “La nieve es blanca.” Though sometimes our speaker would not utter “La nieve es blanca” in the presence of snow that is white, sometimes she would.

More generally, to be able to interpret a speaker’s language we must assume that at least sometimes the speaker makes her utterances in response to what is happening in her environment. Other times we would interpret in light of these privileged cases. Now, Davidson notes, it is up to us interpreters to discern which environmental features the speaker is responding to when we are in such privileged cases. The only way in which we could do so, Davidson concludes, is by constraining our interpretation by the principle of charity. We must assume that the speaker believes roughly what we believe about the world. This guarantees that she would find the same environmental features perceptually salient as we do, and so would at least sometimes respond to them when speaking her language.

How does this establish the impossibility of partial non-intertranslatability? Davidson surmises that since reliance on the principle of charity is a necessary condition on interpretation: “Given the underlying methodology of interpretation, we could not be in a position to judge that others had concepts or beliefs radically different from our own.” Without the possibility of recognizing radically different concepts or beliefs, we could not be in a position to judge that any significant part of anyone’s language failed to be intertranslatable with ours either. Whatever difficulty we might have in translating a speaker’s utterances could never rise to the level of partial non-intertranslatability. In fact, Davidson concludes, every language must be basically intertranslatable into our own, if it is a language at all. But then there could never be any evidence of anyone’s conceiving the world relative to her way of thinking instead of ours.

Since Davidson claims to have disqualified the possibility of completely and partially non-intertranslatable languages, he claims to have disqualified the possibility of our ever having any evidence of scheme-content dualism. Davidson concludes that the very idea of a human and empirical contribution to our knowledge is unintelligible. Does he think that we know nothing? Quite the contrary, while knowledge does not come from anywhere, it is still about something. For Davidson, it is about the world, of which we human beings are a part. Once we rid ourselves of the notion that knowledge has contributing factors, Davidson believes, we realize that we are in cognitive contact with the world directly. Neither reason or experience, nor reason or language, intercedes. Davidson concludes: “In giving up the dualism . . . we do not give up the world, but re-establish unmediated touch with the familiar objects whose antics make our sentences and opinions true or false.” Absent scheme-content dualism we have direct realism. The world itself, rather than our conception or experience of it, is what we know.

4. Evaluating Davidson’s Argument

Davidson’s arguments are problematic. Consider the argument against the possibility of complete non-intertranslatability first. Even if Davidson is right that understanding a language as organizing or fitting empirical content gives us no license on such a
possibility, he fails to show that scheme and content can interact in only these ways. While Davidson does make an effort to subsume other notions under the notions of organization and fit, for all we know other notions are left out. We then have no definitive reason to accept his argument against the possibility of complete non-intertranslatability.

Luckily for Davidson, he does not need that argument. Though he does not realize it, disqualifying the possibility of partial non-intertranslatability disqualifies the possibility of the complete variety also. If it is not the case that parts of two languages are non-intertranslatable, then it is not the case that the whole of two languages are non-intertranslatable either. Put differently, if we cannot be in a position to judge that others have concepts or beliefs radically different from our own, then we cannot be in a position to judge that others possess languages partly or completely non-intertranslatable into our own. Davidson’s argument against scheme–content dualism therefore rests on his argument against the possibility of partially non-intertranslatable languages.

What should we make of that argument? Suppose that we could never be in a position to judge that others have concepts or beliefs radically different from ours. Languages still seem to contribute something to what we know. Say that we read in a textbook: “China has over one billion people.” If the textbook is written in American English, then it says that China has over one thousand million people, since in American English “one billion” means one thousand million. In this case it says something true. If the textbook is written in British English, then it says that China has over one million million people, since in British English “one billion” means one million million. This time it says something false. If the textbook is written in Chinese, then “China has over one billion people” says nothing at all. This is not a legitimate sentence in Chinese. The status of our knowledge claims depends on the language in which we express them. Considerations of language therefore seem to be of the utmost importance when considering what counts as knowledge.

Of course Davidson would respond that “China has over one billion people” can be translated from American English into British English and Chinese. There would be no evidence that speakers of any of these languages conceive of the world differently, only that they use different words to express the same thing. But this gives rise to a different worry. Why has Davidson shown that we can have no scheme rather than the same scheme? We asked above what would count as evidence of scheme–content dualism. The answer that we gave was drastic disagreement in the knowledge claims that different human beings reach, which would result in completely or partially non-intertranslatable languages. But if a conceptual scheme is meant to be the human contribution to knowledge, then non-intertranslatable or intertranslatable languages should be sufficient evidence for the intelligibility of a conceptual scheme. After all, human beings contribute language, intertranslatable or not. And Davidson had himself claimed: “We may identify conceptual schemes with languages . . . , or better, allowing for the possibility that more than one language may express the same scheme, sets of intertranslatable languages.”[15] Davidson does in fact think that he has shown that all languages are intertranslatable. Why should we not take Davidson at his word? Why has he not shown that there can be a single conceptual scheme?
Davidson responds to just this worry:

If I am right, then there never can be a situation in which we can intelligibly compare or contrast divergent schemes, and in that case we do better not to say that there is one scheme, as if we understood what it would be like for there to be more.\textsuperscript{14}

If we cannot know what it would be for schemes to differ, then it makes no sense to say that all those whose languages we can interpret have a scheme that is the same. We would have no contrast class to the case of there being only one conceptual scheme.

Davidson’s reasoning, however, is fallacious. Consider all the logically possible worlds that exist—all the different ways that reality could be. All these possible worlds together comprise a single set, the set of all logically possible worlds. This is true even though there could be no \textit{other} set of logically possible worlds. Now consider all the intertranslatable languages. If Davidson is right, then all languages are intertranslatable, so the set of all intertranslatable languages just is the set of all languages. This is true even though there could be no other set of languages. Further, if a contrast class is required to identify them as a set, then the contrast need not be the set of \textit{non}-intertranslatable languages. If all languages are intertranslatable, then anything that contrasts with languages will do. The set of noises that are not languages can contrast with and thus allow us to identify the set of languages that are intertranslatable. The languages would comprise a scheme; the noises, not. The very idea of a conceptual scheme makes sense after all.

Finally, with the scheme idea now intelligible, the empirical-content idea is intelligible also. Davidson thinks that we have knowledge about the world. If it makes sense to say that our language contributes to that knowledge by providing us with concepts, then it also makes sense to say that the world contributes to that knowledge by providing us with experience. Scheme-content dualism returns.

5. Lessons

What should we make of Quine’s and Davidson’s arguments? Let me draw three lessons. First, Quine is right. It makes no sense to speak about the sources of our knowledge claims in isolation from one another. All our knowledge depends holistically on the way in which we conceive of the world and the way that the world contributes to that conception. Further, as we saw at the outset, this \textit{also} means that disciplines traditionally thought to be non-empirical, like logic and mathematics, depend for their truth or falsity on experience too. Knowledge itself has to be reimagined. Nothing that we know is divorced from experience.

Second, Davidson is wrong. It does make sense to speak about human and empirical contributions to knowledge. Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, can more or less stay as it is. Further, if Davidson shows anything, it is that we can never have evidence of beings who conceive of the world in ways radically different from how we ourselves do. That does not make scheme-content dualism unintelligible; it makes a polyschematic form of the dualism unintelligible. We can understand what it would be for beings to contribute the same basic input to their knowledge as we do ourselves. \textit{Different} input is the problem.
Third, whether or not Davidson is right, his arguments point the way to an epistemic position that shares important features of Quine’s and Kant’s, yet is interesting in its own right. On the one hand, Quine, unlike Kant, thinks that knowledge is holistic. Though Davidson claims to reject Quine’s dualism of language and experience, he endorses Quine’s holism. On the other hand, Kant, unlike Quine, thinks that all human beings have the same conceptual scheme. Though Davidson claims to reject the very idea of such a scheme, his arguments make such a universal scheme intelligible. Thus the view that Davidson in fact leaves us is this. Though there is no tracing the non-empirical and empirical contributions to individual knowledge claims, all human beings contribute the same non-empirical factors to what we know. While this “holistic Kantianism”—or “monoschematic holism”—is not necessarily correct, it is a position that, so far as I know, no one in the history of philosophy has articulated.

Endnotes

3. “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” p. 34.
4. “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” p. 43. Instead of being a particle, the photon would be a wave.
7. I am assuming with Quine that we so far have no compelling reason to reject the law of non-contradiction.
9. We would presumably identify these privileged cases, when the speaker does make her utterances in response to what is happening in her environment, by trial and error.
Questions for Discussion

1. In discussing the challenges facing representationalism, it was noted that some fault Kant’s epistemology for being highly complex. Is a high degree of theoretical complexity always a flaw in a theory? If so, why? If not, are there conditions for deciding when theoretical complexity is problematic and when it is not?

2. The metaphysical dispute between materialists and idealists was offered as an example of a philosophical dispute the resolution of which would have no impact on human life. Do you agree that this is so? If not, what practical implications do you think could follow from the resolution of this dispute?

3. How does William James answer the question of whether the man went round the squirrel? Do you accept his answer?

4. How does Davidson respond to the suggestion that his argument against the possibility of a conceptual scheme might be used to show that there can be only one conceptual scheme? Why does Goldberg find this response unconvincing? Who do you think is right on this issue?

Endnotes


2. W. V. Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” in From a Logical Point of View: Nine


3. Ibid., p. 44.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN EPISTEMOLOGY

Generally speaking, contemporary epistemology is going through a skeptical phase. Philosophers today are far less confident than they were in the modern period (the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries) in our ability to discover the absolutely certain foundations of knowledge. Recall how Descartes sought to find a grounding for all knowledge on absolutely certain foundations: the thinking self, the cogito, and how empiricism tried to find a grounding for knowledge on the absolute certainty of sense perception. Similarly, philosophy in the twentieth century tried to ground knowledge on the absolute certainty of logic and mathematics.

Today this quest for certainty seems to many only a lost dream. Most philosophers today are fallibilists—that is, they reject the idea that knowledge can ever be based on such absolute certainties. However, fallibilism does not imply that knowledge is impossible, nor does it lead to skepticism. If we understand knowledge as something less than absolute certainty, then knowledge is indeed possible.

A more skeptical attitude toward knowledge, however, arose among French philosophers in the middle of the twentieth century and has led to a point of view known as postmodernism. If modernism was dominated by the desire for absolute foundations for knowledge and the quest for certainty, postmodernism rejects both. The postmodern view is espoused in the writings of Jacques Derrida (Of Grammatology) and Michel Foucault (The Archaeology of Knowledge), among others. Much of this approach is alien to American and British traditions, and there has been great resistance to this invasion of these ideas by those working in the mainstreams of Anglo-American philosophical thought. Not only are the postmodernist ideas themselves highly controversial, they are also written in a dense and incomprehensible style that is difficult for the person not versed in the jargon of postmodernism to understand.
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