Title
Clarifications

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/56v419tz

Journal
History of European Ideas, 28

Author
Bevir, Mark

Publication Date
2002

Peer reviewed

Clarifications

By Mark Bevir

I. Contact details

Address: Department of Political Science, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley,

CA 94720-1950. Email: mbevir@socrates.berkeley.edu

II. Biographical details

Mark Bevir is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of

California at Berkeley. His publications include The Logic of the History of Ideas

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

Clarifications

I am truly grateful to all those who have written so thoughtfully about my work. To have others engaging so thoroughly with my ideas is a great privilege, the measure of which I fully recognize. In reply, I want to consider the ambition of the <u>Logic</u> by means of an examination of the relationship of philosophy to sociology and history. Having done so, I will go on to address more specific issues about meaning and its connection to intentionality, about the self in relation to language, and about knowledge and truth.

The <u>Logic</u> offers a philosophical analysis of the forms of reasoning appropriate to intellectual history. As a work of philosophy, it proceeds by exploring the content and implications of our concepts instead of by examining empirical cases. The analysis it offers thus purports to be valid for us by virtue of our concepts alone: we hold certain concepts, and, if the arguments in the <u>Logic</u> are valid, these concepts should lead us to a commitment to the forms of reasoning defended therein. However, while the analysis offered by the <u>Logic</u> is valid for us by virtue of our concepts alone, it might not be valid universally since people from other times or cultures with very different concepts might have no reason to adopt it.

Although the <u>Logic</u> is a work of philosophy, its subject matter is the history of ideas. It analyses the nature of meanings, conceived as the objects studied by historians of ideas, and it then considers what forms of explanation and justification are appropriate to meanings. While the history of ideas thus dictates the topics of my philosophical analysis, the analysis has implications that outrun the history of ideas. Melissa Lane is right, for example, to suggest that the <u>Logic</u> offers an analysis of belief in general, an

analysis that applies not only to Ideas with a high cultural status but also the quotidian ideas that constitute the often unreflective bedrock of the everyday practices of ordinary people, and an analysis that applies not only to the beliefs and practices of the past but also those of our contemporaries.[1] The Logic thus offers a bridge between intellectual history and social history, especially now that social history has become open to a range of linguistic and ideational turns. By bringing Ideas and ideas together, it opens a space in which historians of ideas are not just interpreters of canonical texts but also students of the ways in which ideas, beliefs, and traditions have been intrinsic to the very making of history, that is, to the roles beliefs have played in generating historical and contemporary practices. So, although the ostensive subject matter of the analysis of the Logic is the history of ideas, my broad notion of idea or belief, together with my view of the role of beliefs in social life, gives to this analysis the ambition of being a logic appropriate to human life in general – a logic of the human sciences.

Having owned up to such a grandiose ambition, let me immediately point to a limit to it, and thereby, I hope, make it seem more plausible. The ambition implicit in the Logic is only one of providing an account of the abstract forms of reasoning appropriate to the human sciences; it does not extend to an attempt to fill out the content human scientists should give to these forms of reasoning in studies of particular eras, types of organization, or events. The Logic is merely a work of philosophy; it is not also a substantive work of sociology or history.

<u>Philosophy and History</u>

We should be clear about the distinction between philosophical and historical analysis since it recurs in what follows. Because logical analysis aims to be valid for us by virtue of the meaning of our concepts alone, it applies to everything we discuss using the relevant concepts. The <u>Logic</u> offers an analysis of the forms of reasoning we should deploy throughout the whole of the history of ideas irrespective of special circumstances of time or place. The <u>Logic</u> does not offer historical or sociological theories of the nature or development of ideas under particular sets of circumstances: were it to do so, it would have to appeal to an empirical account of those circumstances, so it could not be valid for us by virtue of our concepts alone. From the perspective of the <u>Logic</u>, therefore, valid historical or sociological theories have to be compatible with its philosophical analysis, but they are not restricted to that analysis. Although we will meet various examples of this distinction between philosophical analysis and historical or sociological theorizing in what follows, it might be useful to introduce one here. The <u>Logic</u> analyses tradition as a term denoting the inevitability – given our concepts – of our conceiving of individuals as inheriting initial webs of beliefs from society. It contrasts this notion of tradition with Thomas Kuhn's notion of a paradigm on the grounds that Kuhn's analysis derives not from our concepts alone but from specific sociological or historical features of modern science.[2] Because the history of ideas incorporates modern science, my concept of tradition has to apply to it. But because modern science entails particular circumstances, tradition might operate therein in a particular way, perhaps even that suggested by Kuhn.

Even after we grasp the distinction between philosophical and sociological or historical analysis, critics might object to the ambition implicit in the <u>Logic</u>. They might

argue, as Alun Munslow does here, that a logic that covers the human sciences as a whole will neglect the otherness of the past and so be inadequate to history. Is it reasonable to impose our concepts of belief, action, and the like on others even if they do not hold these concepts? In response to this question, we can start by pointing out that while we apply some of our concepts to all places and cultures, these concepts are typically abstract ones that merely invoke a human capacity, so they allow us to locate a tremendous variety of content under them. When we apply our categories of belief and action to the past as a whole, we leave entirely open the question of what beliefs people held and what actions they performed, and the possibility of their beliefs and action being dramatically different from ours explains why the past can seem so entirely other – the peculiar puzzlement we might feel when confronted with the old Chinese system for classifying animals. Still our abstract categories of belief and action do indeed appear to be ones that we apply to the past as a whole: even if people from another time or culture lacked any concept akin to ours of a belief or action, we want to ascribe to them capacities for holding beliefs and for performing actions. The only alternative to doing so is to deny that some people had the capacity to hold beliefs or to perform actions. Surely, though, even if people did not hold the relevant concepts, we would have no warrant for dehumanizing them in this way?

Having distinguished philosophy from substantive work in history and sociology let me immediately add that the two are always parasitic on one another. Substantive works of history always presuppose, at least implicitly, some logic: they necessarily make philosophical assumptions about the sorts of objects that exist and the forms of reasoning appropriate to such objects. While the <u>Logic</u> brings these issues to the fore explicitly to reflect upon them, the issues it thus considers are ones all historians take sides on, at least

implicitly. Equally, however, all philosophy, at least in my opinion, takes place within a historical context: it goes to work on a particular set of concepts that people happen to hold, where the explanation of their doing so is always a contingent, historical one. The Logic thus concludes with a self-reflexive moment in which its own set of concepts and concerns are shown to be explicable historically using the very forms of explanation it defends.

A broad historical context of the Logic lies where a tradition of social humanism confronts issues posed by a rejection of foundationalism. As such, many of its concerns overlap with those of Jacques Derrida: both explore how we can think about knowledge without certainty, and about a radically contingent subjectivity that lacks pure reason or pure experience as a basis for self-foundation. Equally, one of the narrower contexts of the Logic is what Robert Stern describes as post-Strawsonian and post-Wittgensteinian philosophy of language and its implications for historical theory. As such, even more of its concerns overlap with those of Quentin Skinner: both explore what it means to situate utterances in particular settings in order to avoid overt or covert appeals to universals.

Because I share historical contexts with Derrida and Skinner, they provided, along with others, useful stalking horses through discussion of whom I gave specific content and direction to my analyses of meaning, the self, and knowledge. Yet whenever people use stalking horses in this way, they open themselves up to the charge, leveled here by Stern and Hugh Rayment-Pickard, of having miss-read the relevant others. One response to this charge would be to say that I do not much care if it is valid or not. If my readers are willing to accept my analyses of meaning, the self, and knowledge, I am willing to

put to one side the question of whether or not these views are also those of Derrida and Skinner.

Another response to the charge of miss-reading is to say that while I share themes and concerns with Skinner and Derrida, there are aspects to their work that go against the grain of the Logic. From this perspective, the Logic appears as an attempt to sort wheat from chaff in Derrida or Skinner and so to defend at a more viable contextualism or anti-foundationalism. Again, we might say that the Logic attempts to resolve difficulties in contextualism and anti-foundationalism so as to arrive at positions akin to those of Skinner and Derrida.

Consider the case of Skinner's contextualism. The Logic argues that individual intentions are neither determined nor limited by the relevant linguistic conventions, so knowledge of the conventions cannot be either necessary or sufficient for uptake of the intentions. Because I read Skinner(1) as saying that historians need knowledge of the linguistic context to ensure uptake of an author's intentions, I present this argument in opposition to his views. In contrast, Stern reads Skinner(2) as saying that conventions are just a guide to intentions, so his method is helpful without being necessary or infallible. All too often debates about rival readings of authors such as Skinner become unfruitful, with the disputants pointing to isolated passages that support their preferred readings.[3] To avoid such a debate, I want to suggest that the Logic can be read as an account of where we should go if we take Skinner(2) seriously. For a start, if "study the linguistic contexts" is just a heuristic, contextualism lacks any epistemological criteria by which to decide between good and bad history; so, we can read the Logic's analysis of objectivity as an attempt to provide just such criteria. Similarly, if conventions do not define or limit

intentional meanings, contextualism lacks an account of intentionality in its relation to meaning, society, and the self; so, we can read the Logic's analyses of belief, tradition, and thought as attempts to provide just such an account. The Logic can be read, then, as an attempt to think through a reasonable contextualism that would preserve Skinner's profound historicism while accepting that his method is a useful heuristic rather than a necessary or sufficient condition for understanding.

Consider now the case of Derrida's anti-foundationalism. Whereas I read Derrida(1) as a postmodern skeptic, Rayment-Pickard postulates a Derrida(2) who rejects foundationalism while retaining a notion of truth understood contextually in relation to rules. Derrida(2) comes very close to the Logic's analysis of objectivity as the product of historically situated comparisons between rival accounts conducted in terms of specified criteria and rules of thumb. Yet, unlike the Logic, Derrida(2) does not give any specific content to, or justification for, such criteria and rules, resorting instead to a mystical faith allegedly built into the very use of language. Why is this? On the one hand, we might suggest that Derrida(2) can not give content to his epistemic rules because if he did so, his epistemology would be open to just the sort of deconstruction he makes of alternative positions. In this case, Derrida(2) collapses into Derrida(1), a postmodern skeptic whose thought runs into clear aporias, which he meets with an unformulated mysticism. On the other hand, we might persevere with Derrida(2) by saying he could give content to such criteria and rules in a way that at least would avoid foundationalism. In this case, we can read the Logic as an account of where we should go if we take Derrida(2) seriously. For a start, we can read its analysis of objectivity as an attempt to give justifiable content to the sort of criteria that might constitute an anti-foundational epistemology. In addition,

because any such epistemology must ascribe to the subject a capacity for local reasoning in the application of such criteria, anti-foundationalism needs an account of the self that explores the content and place of such capacities; so, we can read the Logic's analyses of belief, tradition, and thought as attempts to provide just such an account. The Logic can be read, then, as an attempt to think through a reasonable anti-foundationalism that would preserve Derrida's critique of pure presence and the autonomous self only then to go on to offer postmetaphysical concepts of truth and reason.

Meaning and Intention

  The Logic explores philosophical questions about meaning, the self, and knowledge in dialogue with historicism and anti-foundationalism. It begins with an analysis of meaning because meanings are the objects studied by historians of ideas. It seeks, in accord with its philosophical task, to provide an analysis of meaning that applies to human life as a whole. In brief, its analysis shows that meanings are weak intentions, where weak intentions consist of expressed beliefs, and where in ascribing beliefs we should adopt presumptions in favour of the sincere, the rational, and the conscious. I now want to clarify this brief account of meaning in various respects.

  The first clarification concerns the nature of intentionality. The Logic explicitly avoids a strong intentionalism in which intentionality consists of prior purposes. Instead, it advocates a weak intentionalism in which the notion of intentionality captures the way in which the mind can be directed to, or constitutive of, objects in the world.[4] To adopt an intentionalist theory of meaning is, from this perspective, to suggest that meanings only exist in relation to minds. Because my theory of meaning relates to intentional

states in general, rather than prior purposes in particular, I allow that readers, as well as authors, can fix a meaning to an utterance by means of their intentional activity. As Stern suggests, my intentional analysis of meaning serves primarily to sustain a procedural individualism, according to which utterances only have meanings for individuals, not in themselves.[5] Whenever we ask, or say, what an utterance means, we should specify for whom it does so. Once we unpack the intentional theory of meaning in this way, we render otiose those criticisms of it that seek to point to a gap between meanings and the motives of authors.

The second clarification concerns the determinacy of the meaning of a particular utterance. As Lane and Stern suggest, to allow that the intentionality of readers can give meaning to texts is to point toward a kind of textual indeterminacy: it implies that a text, such as Hobbes's Leviathan, has no single meaning. However, I do not think this textual indeterminacy poses a problem. We should recall that procedural individualism implies a text only has meanings for people, not in itself. Thus, texts do not have single meanings precisely because they do not have any meaning at all, at least not in themselves. Once we give up the bad habit of talking as if texts have meanings in themselves, we will have to ask not about the meaning of the text but about the meaning it had for specific people – we will ask about the meaning of Leviathan to Hobbes, or about its meaning to a cluster of seventeenth century readers. Moreover, when we turn to the meaning of a text for someone, we no longer confront indeterminacy: the way later readers understood the text, for example, has no impact whatsoever on the meaning of Leviathan to Hobbes. The Logic, we might say, leads to textual indeterminacy but not meaning indeterminacy.

Lane asks why modern readers should do any work to grasp the meaning of the text if they can simply read it and establish a meaning for themselves. On the one hand, we should say that modern readers should not be interested in the meaning of a text because texts do not have meanings. On the other, we should say that if a modern reader wants to know what Leviathan meant for Hobbes, they have to the relevant historical work. Stern asks how we can account for cases in which the audience has misunderstood what was being said to them. On the one hand, we should say that the audience could not misunderstand the utterance in itself because it has no meaning in itself. On the other, we should say that they could misunderstand the meaning of the utterance to the speaker and so the beliefs the speaker wanted to convey to them.

The third clarification concerns the place of imagery and metaphor in my analysis of meaning. By identifying weak intentions with expressed beliefs, the Logic can seem, as it does to Garnett, to neglect these aspects of language. Yet the dichotomy between imagery and beliefs seems to me to be a false one. When someone uses or responds to an image, they do so because they believe, whether consciously or subconsciously, that it conveys or embodies an aspect of their worldview. In so far as images and metaphor thus fall within a broad concept of belief, moreover, they are clearly covered by my analysis of meaning. The question of the place of imagery arises in relation to the example, found in the Logic, in which Paul says "hallelujah lass" to Susan. Imagine, then, that Paul says "hallelujah lass" to Susan, and Susan understands his utterance to be a patronizing and gendered remark. In this case, the Logic suggests that we might say that Susan considers the image of "a lass" to imply a subordinate role for women in a way that gives to the "hallelujah" a tinge of surprise that a woman should have come up with a good idea.

Now, because these are all Susan's beliefs about the meaning of the word "lass", the meaning of the image to her surely consists of her beliefs. Similarly, if Susan thinks the meaning of the utterance to Paul or to most people in her society is much the same as to her, then what she is doing is to ascribe sexist beliefs to him or to most people in her society and so to see the imagery of his utterance as reflective of these beliefs. The meanings of utterances – including imagery, rhetoric, and metaphor – to their authors or their readers thus consists of beliefs.[6]

I suspect, however, that behind Garnett's comments about imagery there lurks a notion that imagery, rhetoric, and metaphor somehow break out of the bounds of my procedural individualism. Perhaps Garnett wants to suggest that images have a structural content apart from the ways in which they are used or understood by specific individuals. She might want to say, for instance, that Paul's comment is patronizing and gendered irrespective of the beliefs of Jane and he. Clearly the Logic denies that any aspect of an utterance, including its imagery, has such a structural meaning. It argues that reading allegedly structural meanings into utterances encourages miss-understanding. Many people from the north of England deploy the term "lass" as one of affection. It is possible, therefore, that Paul is using it merely to convey affection without any gendered tone, and it is also possible that Susan understands Paul to be conveying affection without any gendered tone. Let us suppose that these possibilities are so. In this case, if we interpreted Paul's comment as gendered and patronizing, we would miss-understand the situation, and, moreover, we would do so precisely because we imposed our norms of the use of language on a setting in which they were absent. Of course, we might want to argue that Paul and his audience are sexist even if they do not recognize this fact, but to

argue this, we would need to show that the meanings Paul and his audience attached to the utterance embodied beliefs we consider to be sexist; it would be inadequate to say that his words are inherently sexist or his words have sexist tones in our life-world.

If I might digress for a moment, Garnett also expresses surprise that I do not flag the interpretation of Paul's utterance as a patronizing and gendered one, while others have been surprised at how little I appeal to concrete historical examples. However, in the first chapter of the Logic I explicitly discuss the role of examples in philosophical analysis. Examples, I argue, often have to be constructed so as to capture the particular conceptual distinction or connection that the philosopher wishes to make, so examples drawn from the real world are often of little use. Likewise, the point of the "hallelujah lass" example is to highlight conceptual distinctions between semantic, linguistic, and hermeneutic meaning, and to highlight these distinctions I needed only to point to some of the possible interpretations of Paul's utterance, notably those that involved different truth-conditions and exhibited the dangers of anachronism. I would have added little, if anything, to the philosophical argument being made by describing all the other ways in which we could interpret the phrase "hallelujah lass".

The final clarification to my analysis of meaning concerns the status of the presumptions in favour of the sincere, rational, and conscious that we should operate with when we ascribe beliefs. Because meanings derive from weak intentions understood as beliefs, to grasp the meaning of an utterance for someone is to ascribe beliefs to that person. The ascription of beliefs to people is, I argue, a process governed by logical presumptions in favour of sincere, rational, and conscious beliefs. Here the nature of a presumption reflects the distinction between philosophy as logic and history and

sociology as empirics. Presumptions are products of a logical analysis of our concepts as opposed to any expectations we might adopt as a consequence of empirical studies of the world undertaken against the background of these presumptions. Presumptions thus do not tell us what sort of beliefs we should look for when we approach the world, let alone what sort of beliefs we will find. The role of presumptions is instead to distinguish between types of belief for which we need to adopt different forms of explanation. The content I give to the concepts of rationality and the conscious thus derives from what we can include in each type of explanation, not from the dominant use of such concepts in our society. Their content is broader than one might expect: rationality equates with consistency with one's own notion of best belief, and the conscious includes the subconscious, excluding only beliefs that contradict one's main set of beliefs.

Presumptions are rules that regulate our practice of belief ascription, not truths about the world. As James Martin says, they are therefore incomplete in that they do not tell us about the historical and sociological settings that legitimate or silence certain people or ideas. The Logic does not tell us about such things precisely because they are topics for historical or sociological theorizing not philosophical analysis. It is for others, whether they be poststructuralists or not, to explore the ways in which norms or power define who is authorized to say what in any particular historical context, and even the ways in which the relevant norms dictate who or what is or is not deemed rational. Although the Logic is thus quite compatible with the sort of historical and sociological theorizing for which Martin calls, I have qualms about his apparent conception of the relationship of this sort of theorizing to logical analysis. Whereas I am suggesting that the Logic provides an analysis of the forms of reasoning appropriate to the human

sciences, including historical and sociological theories about the ways in which norms and power include and exclude certain voices, poststructuralists often imply that their historical and sociological theories undermine all logical analyses; they imply any logic involves an illegitimate imposition of a specific concept of rationality that acts so as to exclude certain voices.[7] In so far as poststructuralists seek to undercut all logical analysis, however, they run into an aporia: if their historical and sociological theories undercut all logical analysis, they could have no valid reasons for adopting the forms of reasoning they do in adopting their historical and sociological positions. To avoid this obvious aporia, poststructuralists have to allow a space for a logical analysis of the forms of reasoning appropriate to the human sciences. The Logic occupies this space.

As Stern suggests, presumptions are rules or norms informing the process of ascribing beliefs; they are not truths about how the world is. Yet as Stern indicates there are a number of different ways of unpacking the status of such rules. The situation is further complicated by the fact that I unpack the presumption in favour of rationality slightly differently from those in favour of sincerity and the conscious. We can unpack the latter two as saying: in our community we generally presuppose that expressed beliefs are held sincerely and consciously because without these presumptions we could undertake no investigation – at least no investigation with our concepts – into what people believe (ie. Stern's 2'). As Stern finds this way of unpacking my presumptions unproblematic, at least when understood as analogous to Donald Davidson's principle of charity, I leave the matter there.[8] Stern's concern is that I sometimes seem to unpack the presumptions in a different way. This concern derives, I suspect, largely from my making a stronger claim on behalf of a presumption in favour of rationality as

consistency. The presumption in favour of rationality can be unpacked as saying: in our community we presuppose that expressed beliefs are rational because without this presupposition we could undertake no successful investigation into what people believe because – according to our concepts – people must mostly have consistent beliefs given that they act in the world (ie. Stern's 2'''). Stern worries that a stronger claim of this sort looks vulnerable because it seems to require a transcendental argument. In fact, however, the argument involves only a quasi-analytical claim that is true for us by virtue of our concepts alone: it does not rely on a transcendental claim that would be true for everyone by virtue of pure reason. My presumption in favour of rationality is one we should adopt given our concepts, but it is not one that people with radically different concepts need adopt.

Perhaps I might finish this discussion of meaning and intention by picking up Garnett's example of Alfred Marshall. We can easily unpack this narrative, including its critical aspect, in the terms of the <u>Logic</u>. Marshall, we can say, believed in an individualistic methodology in economics and also a gendered view of the role of women such that he saw the family as a unit. Next we might ask if and how Marshall sought to reconcile these two beliefs so as to make them consistent; indeed, we might broaden out the discussion to encompass his treatment of other units, such as the firm, that also seem to be at odds with his individualistic methodology. Finally, whether or not we judge that Marshall brought these two sets of beliefs together in a consistent web, we might explain his beliefs in part by reference to the vision of the family within the tradition of Victorian evangelicalism, and we might then go on to denounce this vision of the family as a gendered one.[9]

<u>The Self and Language</u>

When we explore meanings, we concern ourselves with intentionality, or, to be more specific, with the beliefs expressed within the relevant utterances. Historians of ideas seek to understand and explain beliefs from the past. The <u>Logic</u> suggests that we cannot specify necessary or sufficient criteria for ensuring historians come to understand an utterance correctly. Questions about how best to acquire understanding of utterances are questions of heuristics, not of logic. Hence, the <u>Logic</u> turns from an analysis of the nature of meaning to an analysis not of a method of understanding, but of the forms of explanation appropriate to beliefs. It analyses the forms of explanation appropriate to, first, sincere, conscious, and rational beliefs, and, second, various types of distorted belief. To explain sincere, conscious, and rational beliefs, we should locate any given belief in the wider web of beliefs of the person or people who held it; and we can then explain why the relevant person or people held this wider web of beliefs by reference to the traditions they set out from and the dilemmas in response to which they modified the beliefs they inherited. Once again, however, this brief account of the arguments of the <u>Logic</u> stands in need of several clarifications.

One clarification concerns the place of explication in the history of ideas. Lane suggests that my turn to explanation neglects the primary task of the historian of ideas, which she identifies as "the explication of texts". In my view, of course, texts do not have meanings in themselves, so they are not things we can explicate. Lane herself is somewhat ambiguous here: at times she appears to cling to what we might think of as a traditionalist view of the history of ideas in which historians seek "an understanding of

the text"; and at other times she appears to follow Skinner in equating an understanding of the text with one of authorial intention – historians seek to grasp "the purposes which the author had".[10] Because I have already argued that texts do not have meanings in themselves, allow me here to consider only the question of how the Logic covers the task of explicating the beliefs, intentions, or purposes of authors, and, I would add, of readers. In my view, such explication is indistinguishable from explanation since both involve ascribing beliefs and pro-attitudes to someone and then showing how their beliefs coalesced as a web. If historians want to explicate W. S. Jevons's, Theory of Political Economy, for example, they might say that he believed values determine prices, and that value depends on marginal utility, and so on.[11] Likewise, if they want to explain Jevons's belief that values determine prices, they should begin by locating that belief in the context of his wider web of beliefs, including the belief that value depends on marginal utility, and so on. The task of explicating the beliefs expressed in a text is itself a part of the forms of explanation described in the Logic.

Another clarification concerns the role of traditions in explanation. Although explication is a part of explanation, it does not exhaust it. On the contrary, once we locate a belief in its wider web, we then can go on to explore this web in relation to the relevant traditions and dilemmas. The invocation of a tradition explains why someone set out with the initial beliefs they did. The appeal to dilemmas explains why they modified their initial beliefs in the way they did. We need a concept akin to dilemma here because the fact of human agency suggests that we cannot explain how somebody modifies the beliefs they initially inherit from a tradition solely by reference to that tradition. Yet, and this is the clarification, our inability to read-off the way somebody develops a tradition

from the tradition itself does not mean that the tradition has no impact at all on their later development. Rather, the Logic suggests that the way somebody responds to a dilemma will reflect both the content of the dilemma and the content of the tradition against the background of which they do so. Allow me to note in passing, then, that Garnett and Lane miss the point of my use of the example of W. S. Jevons: the example does not purport to show that Jevons's utilitarian inheritance is irrelevant to an understanding or explanation of his later development; it shows, rather, that his utilitarian inheritance can not explain the particular ways in which he modified and deployed this inheritance.

A further clarification concerns the relationship of language and self. In the Logic, I deploy the concept of a tradition to capture the fact that people always inherit a web of beliefs that acts as their starting point. A commitment to agency leads me to argue that any part of a tradition is in principle open to modification by the individual, so whether or not a given part of it continues to appear in their later intellectual development is an empirical question. Robert Burns urges upon us a view of language or tradition as more constitutive of the self than this. How do the beliefs of the individual relate to a social tradition or language? As I think the idea that language constitutes the self is, all at once, fashionable, plausible, and hopelessly vague, I want to dissect it and locate my views in relation to more specifics varieties of it.

A minimal version of the idea that language constitutes the self might understand language as a metaphor for belief. Claim-1 would thus be that our thoughts and actions embody our beliefs. Clearly, however the idea that language constitutes the self suggests that the self does not define itself uninfluenced by a social inheritance. Claim-2 would thus be that our thoughts and actions embody our beliefs, where these beliefs arise

against the background of a social tradition. Claim-2 opposes the autonomous view of

the self as being capable of pure reasoning or pure experiences entirely uninfluenced by

society. Yet to reject autonomy we need not reject the idea of the self being an agent

capable of creative innovations based on his or her own reasoning. We can distinguish,

therefore, between two varieties of claim-2, the first of which allows for agency, and the

second of which rejects agency. Claim-2a is that our thoughts and actions embody our

beliefs, where these beliefs arise against the background of our social inheritances, but

where we are still agents who can modify our inherited beliefs for reasons of our own.

Claim-2b is that our thoughts and actions embody beliefs, where these beliefs arise

against the background of a social inheritance that fixes, or at least limits, the beliefs we

might then go on to adopt. Claim-2a corresponds to the position defended in the Logic.

Although I accept that any given inheritance will make it remarkably unlikely that an

individual will go on to adopt some beliefs, I do not think we have any warrant for

declaring it logical impossible that he or she will do so. Hence, although the historian

should be sensitive to the ways in which traditions do or do not encourage certain paths

of development, they should not take the tradition itself as logically requiring or limiting

such paths. Unless we want to deny agency as well as autonomy – and Burns clearly

does not want to do so – we cannot move from claim-2a to claim-2b.

So far I have been unpacking language in terms of beliefs – whether those of the

individual or those that characterize the tradition the individual inherits. Yet the idea that

language constitutes the self often appears to be one in which language means something

other, or more, than beliefs. Claim-3 is that our thoughts and actions embody our beliefs,

which arise against the background of a tradition we can modify, where both beliefs and

traditions are linguistic entities. That mental states are always constituted by language is the most common implication lurking in the idea that language constitutes the self. It is also, I believe, a mistaken claim. Although proponents of something like claim-3 are inclined to suggest that it derives from the critique of Cartesianism instigated by, among others, Gilbert Ryle and Ludwig Wittgenstein, the analytical behaviorism of these philosophers actually undermines claim-3.[12] Analytical behaviorists want to analyze mental concepts in terms of publicly accessible actions. Analytical behaviorism understands beliefs as constituted by actions; and this undermines claim-3 because actions can give us grounds for the ascription of beliefs without themselves being linguistic: so, for instance, we can look at a barometer without thinking in language "I am looking at a barometer", and we can ascribe beliefs to someone we observe looking at a barometer without assuming they are thinking in language "I am looking at a barometer". Advocates of claim-3 might thus appear to be committed to mentalism – a Cartesian psychology in which mental concepts refer to private states that are open to introspection. Yet mentalism too gives little succor to claim-3 since introspection suggests that we have pre-linguistic sensations, albeit that these are rare and can themselves become objects of our conscious attention only if we have recourse to language.

If claim-3 thus seems implausible, perhaps we should consider the weaker claim-3b: our thoughts and actions embody our beliefs, which arise against the background of a tradition we can modify, where both these beliefs and traditions are generally linguistic entities. The inclusion of the word "generally" is, however, significant: if they are generally but not always linguistic, we need to use concepts – such as belief and tradition – that will cover those cases in which they are not linguistic, but once we use these later

concepts, we unpack claim-3b as equivalent to claim-2a. The question thus arises of why someone might want to say the self is constituted by language rather than to adopt claim-2a which says the self is constituted by beliefs adopted against the background of a social tradition. I suspect that the main reason – though not one apparent in Burns's comments – is to avoid ascribing a capacity for agency to the self. "Language" can invoke a kind of social structure outside the individual that fixes his or her actions and thoughts. While we can endorse claim-3b understood as equivalent to claim-2a, however, we should not be seduced thereby into forgetting, or even denying, our capacity for agency: in other words, we should not mistake claim-3b for the claim-3c that our thoughts and actions embody our beliefs, which arise against the background of a tradition that fixes the beliefs we might then go on to adopt, where both these beliefs and traditions are generally linguistic.

The idea that the self is linguistically constructed makes sense only as claim-2a that our thoughts and actions embody our beliefs where these beliefs arise against the background of a social inheritance. To complete this discussion, I want to indicate that because this claim rejects autonomy, it is at least compatible with, and often positively supportive of, moves away from a Cartesian psychology. For a start, claim-2a, at least as developed in the Logic, implies that individuals never have access to pure experiences or pure reason so they can never become self-made knowers. Similarly, because they can only reason from within their already given web of beliefs, they can never engage in a wholesale rejection of their existing beliefs. What they can do, however, is modify first some of their beliefs and then others until, over time, they might come to reject all the beliefs they initially inherited: the chances of anybody doing so, or even of a particular

person rejecting some entrenched beliefs, are often extremely small, but this does not mean we can take their doing so to be logically impossible.[13] Finally, claim-2a, even when put alongside presumptions in favour of the conscious and rational, does not imply that the self is a unity characterized by a moral conscience based on strong convictions. It implies only that individuals hold beliefs, and that they can reflect upon, and so come to modify or reject these beliefs for reasons of their own. Whether or not a particular self thereby develops into the morally committed figure described by Burns is a contingent matter.

Human agency implies that we have no warrant for declaring it logically impossible that an individual over time could reject any aspect of an inherited tradition. Once again, however, we should distinguish between logical and empirical claims. Although it is not logically impossible, it might be remarkably unlikely: we can judge there were practical limits beyond which someone was not going to go even as we deny these practical limits constituted necessary limits beyond which he or she could not go. In so far as Martin, following the poststructuralists, wants to draw our attention to the ways in which power can impose practical limits, we can thus welcome his doing so. Yet because, as I suggested earlier, all empirical accounts of such practical limits presuppose logical commitments, we need also to explore the logic implicit within the poststructuralist position. Whereas the Logic outlines a repudiation of autonomy alongside a defence of agency, poststructuralists are peculiarly liable to invoke language or discourse as if it were a quasi-structure that fixes or limits speech, and so, wrongly, to slip from claim-3b to claim 3c.

What divides the <u>Logic</u> from poststructuralism here is a commitment to agency as integral to an adequate account of change. As Martin reminds us, Ernesto Laclau conceives of change in terms of the "empty signifier" in a way that reduces the self to "a lack" filled by "subject positions" provided by discourses.[14] An empty signifier is a word or sign that has lost any content it might once have had so that it now functions to articulate diverse elements from across a range of discourses. However, while I can write that last sentence, I am still unable to grasp what an empty signifier is. Perhaps an empty signifier has no content in that it is literally empty so that we cannot say anything is or is not included in its conventional use. Yet such a literal understanding of the concept must surely be mistaken since the usual examples of empty signifiers are obviously not entirely empty in this way: the conventional use of justice does not include a chair, the signifier of a war on terrorism does not include anti-war demonstrations, and the conventional use of law and order does not include a civil war with multiple antagonists. Perhaps, then, an empty signifier has content but not specific content, that is, it is ambiguous with different people using it to cover different objects, events, or states of affairs. Yet such a loose understanding of the concept also must be mistaken because it would mean all our words or signifiers would be empty: after all, both the semantic holism upon which I draw and the poststructuralism upon which Laclau draws deny that any signifier has a one to one correspondence with an object, event, or state of affairs, and they thereby imply that all signifiers are ambiguous. The concept of an empty signifier appears, therefore, to cover either all of our signifiers or none of them, and as such I can not see how it picks out a particular type of signifier that acts as a vehicle of change. I welcome poststructuralist studies of the way power operates to place practical limits upon us provided that these

studies respect agency while denying autonomy. I oppose them only in so far as they tie such studies to fashionable but confused jargon that elides, or denies, agency.

Perhaps I might finish this discussion of the self and language by picking up on Martin's example of the Tory slogan, "saving the pound". We can easily unpack the narrative, including its critical aspect, in the terms of the Logic. The Tories urged people to save the pound because they believed, first, that doing so would raise at least implicitly themes such as the need to defend a British way of life against a foreign invasion, and, second, that such themes were part of a British identity they admired – they did not do so because of detailed economic convictions. In so far as people did change their beliefs in response to this Tory slogan, moreover, we could say that they did so either because they came to believe the relevant economic arguments or because they came to believe that the replacement of sterling with the Euro would undermine a British identity that they want to preserve. To unpack the narrative in this way is to appeal to the beliefs, pro-attitudes, and actions of individual agents. Change happened due to the way people, conceived as agents, responded to sincere or insincere beliefs that Tory politicians, again seen as agents, expressed in an attempt to promote certain of their preferences.[15]

Knowledge and Truth

The Logic analyses not only meaning but also the nature of objective knowledge. After rejecting the possibility of pure facts and pure reason, I defend an anthropological epistemology within which we can reach knowledge that is objective for us by comparing rival accounts of the world in relation to epistemic criteria such as accuracy, consistency, and fruitfulness. I then suggest, against relativists and irrationalists, that we have good

reason for holding on to such objective knowledge because of the nature of our being in the world. Once again, however, there are a number of clarifications to make to this broad account of the epistemology offered in the Logic.

One clarification, offered here in response to Burns, concerns the relationship of objective knowledge to the presumption in favour of rational belief. The presumption in favour of rationality or consistency is a rule that governs the ascription of beliefs. As I have emphasized above, moreover, to adopt a presumption in favour of consistency is not to assume that people always have consistent beliefs, let alone that they always have objective beliefs. Objective beliefs, as defined by my anthropocentric epistemology, are ones we might hold if we compared rival theories using the criteria of comparison specified, and we have no grounds for presuming that people will hold such objective beliefs. Because my epistemology is a normative account of how we can reach objective knowledge – as opposed to an account of an actual practice – it thus has very different content from my analysis of the presumptions that govern our interpretation of actual practices.

Another clarification, offered in response to Stern, locates my anthropological epistemology in relation to constructivism and realism. The epistemology of the Logic overlaps with constructivism in that it emphasizes that we in part construct facts through our theories, and it therefore portrays knowledge as objective in terms of our practices rather than in terms of a relation to the world. Its constructivism appears, for instance, in the way facts are understood as shared agreements, not pure perceptions; and in the turn to judgment and comparison, rather than perception, as activities that make knowledge objectively valid for us. Objective knowledge is entirely a function of a human practice

in that it consists of a suitable relation to shared and constructed facts, as opposed to a suitable fit to the world. However, constructivist epistemologies of this sort face the question of why we should take such objective knowledge to be reasonable with respect to the world. If we do not answer this question, we can appear to have no reason to adopt the beliefs that constitute our objective knowledge and so to be vulnerable to charges of relativism and irrationalism. One part of the answer to the question of why we should take constructed, objective knowledge to be reasonable with respect to the world is to reject the question as missing the point or as asking for a certainty that we cannot have.[16] Another part of the answer is, I believe, to make a vaguely realist gesture towards the nature of our being in the world: our ability to act moderately successfully in the world suggests that our knowledge, beliefs, and perceptions are not wildly random or wholly unreliable, even if they are also not infallible.

A final clarification, offered in response to Munslow, concerns the question of whether or not there is just one legitimate story about the past. The Logic allows for the epistemic validity of multiple histories in several ways. As I have suggested people who hold different concepts from us will have no reason to adopt the conclusions of the Logic, so they reasonably might tell histories based on very different ontologies and forms of explanation. More significantly, even if we accept the conclusions of the Logic, we still will grant epistemic legitimacy to diverse histories. So, historians can tell multiple legitimate stories, invoking different traditions and dilemmas, simply because they are interested in different particulars. For example, if our interest is in Locke's beliefs, our story should focus on the tradition we believe he inherited and the dilemmas to which we believe he responded. In contrast, if our interest is in the beliefs Locke and Hobbes

shared, our story will focus on a different tradition composed of the common influences upon them. We should allow for various legitimate stories, therefore, because traditions and dilemmas are not reified entities, but rather abstractions that we cut out of the general flux of history in order to explain the particulars that are of interest to us, and this implies that we can locate the same individual in relation to different traditions and dilemmas depending on what exactly we hope to explain by so doing.

The <u>Logic</u> also allows for various legitimate stories that seek to explain the same particular. Objective knowledge, I have argued, depends on our comparing rival histories in terms of criteria such as accuracy, comprehensiveness, and fruitfulness. When we thus compare rival histories, however, we might conclude that several are equally plausible. In such cases, we should say that various competing stories are all epistemically valid, though equally, of course, we will reject the validity of those alterative stories that do not do so well in the process of comparison. Contrary to what Munslow suggests, then, the <u>Logic</u> explicitly denies that there is only one legitimate story.

The difference between Munslow and I actually lies in our respective views of the relationship between, to adopt his terms, "narrative structures" and historical "data". Munslow, following Hayden White, suggests that we have pre-figurative historical data on to which we then impose a narrative structure in an act that makes history fictive.[17] In contrast, I think that such appeals to pre-figurative historical data fall foul of the anti-foundationalism that I share with Munslow and White. Once we reject pure facts, surely we have to allow that all data is saturated with our theories, so there can not be a "past" awaiting "the artificial closure of emplotting"; there is no "non-narrativized" or "pre-figurative" past given to us prior to our imposing a narrative upon it. While we should

allow for various legitimate histories, therefore, we should not think of them as being so many narrative structures that historians project onto "pre-figurative" data. We should think of them either as focusing on different particulars or as doing equally well in the process of comparison by which we define objective knowledge.

Perhaps I might finish this discussion of knowledge and truth by pursuing with Rayment-Pickard, the example of Petrarch's assent, or non-assent, of Mount Ventoux. We can easily unpack the narrative, including its plurality, in the terms of the <u>Logic</u>. According to Rayment-Pickard, it is impossible to determine the meaning of Petrarch's action or non-action – whether it reflects a cheerful secular outlook or an agonized and depressed spirituality. In the terms of the <u>Logic</u>, we might say that we have here three stories we judge equally plausible in terms of our criteria of comparison: either Petrarch was a cheerful secularist, or he had an agonized spirituality, or he brought these two outlooks together in some way. However, while we judge these three stories to be equally plausible, we still exclude other alternatives as downright implausible, such as that he was a committed Muslim or that his agonized spirituality derived from reflection on the theory of evolution. Moreover, while we judge multiple stories to be equally plausible, we do not necessarily take these individual stories to be internally irrational, contradictory, or equivocal.

Conclusion

Every study in the human sciences makes logical assumptions about the existence and nature of certain objects. All too often, these assumptions are confused or ill thought out. All too often, human scientists adopt a theory or a concept because it seems to them

that it illuminates their material, or because it has a superficial appeal to them. Yet their material cannot legitimate a theory if, as I have suggested, it is itself theory-laden, and a superficial appeal is no substitute for an investigation of the plausibility and the internal consistency of any set of theoretical assumptions. Much might be gained, therefore, if we paid more attention to the logical assumptions that inform social theories and historical narratives.

The <u>Logic</u> analyses the forms of justification and explanation appropriate to the history of ideas, and the human sciences more generally. In doing so, it grapples with historical and social theory by way of addressing issues in the philosophies of language, and mind and action, as well as epistemology. In response to the foregoing discussions of my work, I have tried to clarify my views on all of these issues. In the philosophy of language, I have emphasized that meanings are always meanings for specific individuals, so if historians say a text meant such and such, they should say for whom it did so. In the philosophy of mind and action, I have emphasized that individuals always acquire their beliefs within a social tradition but equally that individuals are agents who then can go on to modify these beliefs for reasons of their own. In epistemology, I have emphasized that we judge the epistemic value of a history in comparison with others rather than by an appeal to allegedly given facts.

[1] On Ideas as a sub-set of ideas or beliefs see my response to Jorge Gracia in M. Bevir, "Taking Holism Seriously: A Reply to Critics", Philosophical Books 42 (2001), 187-195.

[2] T. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

[3] The Logic (pp. 81-82) points to some of the passages where Skinner implies the study of linguistic contexts is something we must undertake if we are to secure understanding. However, my main reason for reading him as (1) not (2) is that (2) can not sustain many of the positions for which he is best know. For example, if "study linguistic contexts" is just a heuristic, it appears to be akin to "study the life of the author" or "pay some attention to the economic context" since these too are sensible bits of advice, yet Skinner is usually taken as implying that these maxims get in the way of contextualism understood as a method. More generally, Skinner is usually taken as giving a unique status to linguistic contexts rather than putting them on a par with biographical details or socio-economic contexts, and, if we read him as (2) not (1), he does not seem to have any clear reason for so doing.

[4] "Intentional . . . 3. Schol. Philos. Pertaining to the operations of the mind; mental; existing in or for the mind." [Shorter OED].

[5] I might add that my notion of intention as "final purpose" was supposed to capture "a final purpose in writing", not a purpose developed after writing, and as such it is, I think, equivalent to Stern's suggestion that the relevant intention is that held "on making the utterance" – although to allow for the intentionality of readers, we should perhaps say that the relevant intention is that formed "on making or understanding the utterance".

[6] Because my concept of belief covers images, strong convictions, subconscious assumptions, and more, it is, as Lane suggests, a very broad one of little use in guiding historians in determining which of these various types of belief they should find or consider at any given moment. However, the purpose of my concept of belief is not to provide such guidance – something I do not think a logical inquiry can do. It is, rather, to specify the objects of concern to all intellectual historians, and so the objects for which a logic can set up suitable forms of explanation. The value of the concept thus consists in, first, the way it pushes historians to tie meanings to specific individuals, and, second, the way it prompts them to explain meanings in terms of webs of belief, traditions, and dilemmas.

[7] Martin remains ambiguous on this point. At one point, he says my presumptions arise not from logical analysis but from a decision to set a limit that displays the traces of power; but at another, he says my presumptions are not wrong but merely incomplete. In my view, this ambiguity reflects his use of a type of critique that if pushed to its conclusion undercuts itself. For a fuller exploration of the issues raised here see my response to Mark Erickson in M. Bevir, "On the Construction and Use of the Past: A Reply to Critics", History of the Human Sciences.

[8] It is worth noting, however, that the content of my presumptions is less fulsome than that of Davidson's principle of charity. For a discussion of the relation between the two see M. Bevir and F. Ankersmit, "Exchanging Ideas", Rethinking History 4 (2000), 370-371.

[9] Garnett appears to invoke an inconsistency between two languages – economics and the discourse of the family – and then to impose this inconsistency on Marshall. Yet the fact

that we consider these two discourse to be in tension does not imply straightforwardly that Marshall had no way of trying to bring them together. If he did – and I am delberately leaving the matter open – we should recognize this even if we want to point to the impact upon him of a gendered tradition of which we disapprove.

[10] See particularly Q. Skinner, "Motives, Intentions and the Interpretation of Texts", in J. Tully, ed., <u>Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics</u> (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 68-78.

[11] W. Jevons, <u>The Theory of Political Economy</u>, ed. R. Collison Black (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

[12] G. Ryle, <u>The Concept of Mind</u> (London: Hutchinson, 1949); and L. Wittgenstein, <u>Philosophical Investigations</u>, trans. G. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972).

[13] To put the same point differently, I avoid what Burns calls the fallacy of composition because I never suggest that we are in a position to change or doubt all of our beliefs "at the same time"; I merely argue that none of our beliefs are immune from being ones we might come to change or doubt at some time.

[14] I am doubtful that Laclau's position can be reconciled with a post-Marxist politics in the way he implies. Marx, as I understand him, advocated communism partly because it would overcome the exploitation that characterized capitalism and partly because it would realize our species being. Laclau, in contrast, rejects the privileging of class in a way that implies a rejection of Marx's analysis of capitalism as a system that exploits the workers, while also denying that we have a species being to be realized. As such, he appears to leave us bereft of any Marxist reason – as opposed to an emotional legacy – for supporting counter-hegemonic struggles.

[15] Some of the confusions and elisions of poststructuralism are apparent, I believe, in the fact that Martin begins by invoking "the pound" as an "empty signifier" but then goes on to give it content in terms of the intention of the Tories and possible changes in the beliefs of the audience. If "empty signifiers" thus drop out of the narrative to be replaced by intentions and beliefs, the <u>Logic</u> is compatible with poststructuralism, and I welcome the way poststructuralists draw our attention to relations and effects of power. However, if poststructuralists want to deploy the concept of an "empty signifier" to repudiate agency, they need to give it a content that both overcomes its confusions and avoids tacit appeals to agency.

[16] Compare L. Wittgenstein, <u>On Certainty</u>, trans. D. Paul & G. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974).

[17] H. White, <u>Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe</u> (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).