

An Empiricist Theory of Knowledge

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To Anne

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Preface

When I began to teach philosophy, almost every responsible analytic philosopher was an acknowledged empiricist. Today, many analytic philosophers repudiate central tenets of the position, rejecting at least an analytic/synthetic distinction and often pursuing metaphysical questions that main-line empiricists set aside decades ago. I regard this development as unfortunate, a backward step in philosophy that needs to be corrected. Bas van Fraassen and Anil Gupta have recently taken important steps in the right direction. I try to do my part in this book, attacking well-known criticisms of empiricist doctrine and defending the sort of empiricist theory that I consider acceptable.

There is no essence to empiricism: different positions have been defended under the name “empiricism,” and the practice will no doubt continue.¹ The empiricism I learned as a student was called “logical empiricism,” the qualifier marking the importance of formal logic to this version of the theory. One of my teachers, Herbert Feigl, discussed the distinctive claims of an earlier form of this empiricism in a programmatic article called “Logical Empiricism,” which was regarded as something of a manifesto in its day. The adjective Feigl attached to “empiricism” was chiefly owing to the logical and semantical work of Rudolf Carnap, another of my teachers,² who was the dominant figure among the empiricists whose views Feigl was promoting. Carnap’s epistemological views changed significantly over his long philosophical career, and his later views represent a development of empiricism that deserves to be better known by today’s critics of the doctrine.

The objections to empiricism that W. V. Quine formulated in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” (1951) are still widely regarded as successful. The supposed dogmas in question are, Quine said, a belief in a fundamental cleavage between analytic and synthetic truths, on the one hand, and reductionism, the belief that each meaningful statement is equivalent to some logical construct upon terms referring to immediate experience, on the other. As it happens, logical empiricists did not hold the second dogma when Quine’s paper was published. Feigl explicitly denounced it in “Logical Empiricism” (first published in 1943) and Carnap left it behind in the middle thirties.³ The first dogma—“assumption” is really a better word here—was indeed accepted, at least as an ideal, by logical empiricists, and I shall therefore discuss Quine’s objections to it carefully and at length. Although Quine has long been one of my philosophical heroes, I have to say that his objections to analyticity fail to undermine the position Carnap defended in his later years. Carnap was right to set them aside as unsuccessful.

Quine’s criticism was not the only cause of empiricism’s decline; another was the rise of epistemological rationalism. The cause of this phenomenon is complex; no doubt it had something to do with the revival of interest in metaphysics that resulted from Kripke’s revolutionary ideas on identity, necessity, and essential properties. But whatever the actual cause may be, the most influential exponent of the new analytical rationalism turned out to be R. M. Chisholm. As Alvin Plantinga remarked in 1990, Chisholm’s thought “has [in fact]...dominated American epistemology for more than thirty years”;⁴ if this is an exaggeration, as I believe it is, it is nevertheless not very far from the truth. To defend a version of empiricism at the present time it is therefore not sufficient to overcome the criticism of Quine;

¹ See van Fraassen (2002), Appendix B, “A History of the Name ‘Empiricism’.”

² As a graduate student, I spent a year at UCLA, where he was then teaching.

³ He rejected it in Carnap (1936).

⁴ Plantinga (1990), p. 366.

one should also criticize the arguments supporting the alternative position that Chisholm was instrumental in initiating.

Criticizing an alternative position is unfortunately an awkward task. There is always more than one version of such a position and always more than one advocate to confront. Alvin Plantinga, George Bealer, Laurence Bonjour, Christopher Peacock, and Robert Audi have defended well-considered versions of epistemological rationalism, but I cannot examine all of them in a book like this. Instead of focusing attention on particular versions of the doctrine, I shall for the most part attend to what I regard as the most important arguments rationalists offer for synthetic a priori truths. These arguments feature a number of examples that are cited again and again; in 2005 Laurence Bonjour offered the examples that Chisholm gave as early as 1966.⁵ I therefore attend to them closely. My positive arguments against epistemological rationalism depend not on the peculiarities of different rationalist theories but on structural weaknesses common to them all. The propositions they take to be intuitively decidable synthetic truths are actually warranted, if they are actually true, by facts that are far too discursive and stipulative to be a confirming element in any rationalist theory.

In the past twenty years or so academic philosophy has become highly specialized, with the result that philosophers working in epistemology often do not have well-considered views in related subjects such as metaphysics, formal semantics, and philosophy of science. Topics in these related subjects are nevertheless crucially important for basic epistemological disputes. As far as a priori knowledge is concerned, the pertinent topics belong mainly to metaphysics and formal semantics. Specific issues concern the reality and nature of properties and propositions, which rationalists typically regard as providing the foundation for synthetic a priori knowledge. Because recent work in metaphysics and formal semantics puts older views of these supposed objects into serious doubt, I devote part of one chapter to propositions and a whole chapter to properties. Writing this material has reinforced my belief that it is absolutely essential for a responsible treatment of a priori knowledge.

Although critics of empiricism have typically concentrated on an analytic/synthetic distinction, a satisfactory empiricist philosophy must provide an acceptable account of a posteriori knowledge. In my final chapters I therefore discuss problems with the sources of empirical knowledge that empiricists almost always accept: observation, memory, and what Hume called experimental inference. I open chapter five with a consideration of some of these problems, but I soon address the doctrine of semantic externalism that Hilary Putnam developed in criticizing his well-known "brains in a vat" version of a perennial skeptical hypothesis. Although Putnam evidently considered his externalism to be opposed to traditional views of meaning and reference, I argue that it is in fact quite close to the verificationism that was espoused by logical positivists, and I reject it for reasons that apply to that once popular doctrine. As I see it, the empiricists' historical repudiation of empirical entities that cannot possibly be observed is something that an acceptable empiricism must leave behind.

In chapter six I am mainly concerned with "inductive" or a posteriori inference, which has been seriously neglected by main-line epistemologists with rationalist sympathies. (Chisholm had almost nothing to say about this kind of inference in the last edition of his influential *Theory of Knowledge*.) Since inductive methods raise more problems than most philosophers seem to realize, I provide a critical overview of the standard alternatives. My assessment of these methods is

⁵See Chisholm (1989) and Bonjour (2005). Chisholm used the same examples in earlier editions of his *Theory of Knowledge*; the first was published in 1966.

generally negative—even for the current favorite, Inference to the Best Explanation. Arguing that the problems familiar methods are supposed to solve can be disposed of only by relying on Bayes' theorem of probability theory, I end up discussing this theorem and its relation to what can be called "evidential" probability. This kind of probability is often viewed as a measure of subjective belief, but I argue that it must be understood differently if well-known problems are to be avoided. I view it as a measure of certainty and evidential support, a position I do my best to justify. Although some epistemologists are very knowledgeable about probability theory, the subject is evidently daunting to many philosophers. Believing this, I took special pains to make my discussion understandable to those entirely new to the subject. Sophisticated readers can simply skip the explanatory passages I include here and there.

To deal with certain side issues that are highly significant for some philosophers but of minimal interest to many, I followed the example of Fogelin (1994) and van Fraassen (2002) and included a number of appendices. These appendices are generally too long to be footnotes but they are well suited to the end of the book where readers who recognize their importance can consult them. With one exception, a proof that was awkward to place in the text, each appendix is concerned with matters that, in my experience, always eventually arise when philosophical rivals debate epistemological issues. I therefore felt compelled to include them.

A number of friends contributed to the manuscript in one way or another. Joe LaPorte, Steve Braude, Jeffrey Sicha, and Lynne Baker made helpful comments on the chapters they read. LaPorte was particularly helpful with chapters one and six, and Sicha subjected the whole manuscript to very careful scrutiny, doing the sort of thing he did many years ago when I was writing my first book. I am greatly indebted to his good judgment and critical acuity. The late Gregory Fitch offered illuminating remarks on some questions I had with Kripke's footnote about the "necessity of origins"; he was not himself critical of the argument Kripke seemed to give, but his remarks were instrumental in leading me to the criticism I formulate in chapter three. My wonderful wife, Anne, to whom I dedicate this book, was helpful from start to finish. She read every version of the manuscript and always discovered errors that I had somehow missed.

This is my fourth book on epistemology. The first was principally indebted to the work of Wilfrid Sellars, whose influence is discernible here mainly in chapters four and five. The logical empiricist doctrines that I absorbed from Herbert Feigl, Rudolf Carnap, and Grover Maxwell are evident in chapters two and three, and the logical and semantic theory I learned from Donald Kalish and Richard Montague is also apparent there. Montague introduced me to the logical foundations of probability, but my views on that subject are more strongly indebted to the writing of my one-time students Roger Rosenkrantz and Brian Skyrms. The fact that these people, and certain writers whom I have not mentioned, do not agree on all philosophical matters may help to explain the independence of my own philosophical thinking, such as it is. I have had no single path to follow.