

Epistemological consequences of the problem of theory-ladenness of experience.

Any post-positivist account of perception, observation, experience or experiment is likely to refer to 'the' or 'a' problem of theory-ladenness. Following the leading figures on this theme (Hanson [3], Kuhn [5], Feyerabend [2], Toulmin [6], all in the late 1950s and early 1960s), and against the traditional empiricist view that sees experience as independent from any belief held by the subject, we now acknowledge that language, theoretical preferences and other biases influence the subject's experiential report and even possibly the experience itself. This problem has been extremely influential on the way philosophers conceive of experience, but it is puzzling that its recognition is so deeply associated with post-positivist philosophy when, in fact, many empiricist philosophers have been preoccupied with the very same worry, that is, the interdependency between experiential knowledge on the one hand and background beliefs, theories and language on the other. That such problems were not ignored by empiricist philosophers is best seen in empiricist-foundationalist (henceforth EF) accounts of experience (see Carnap [1], Hempel [4]). Hence, EF epistemology, that aims to define experience as completely autonomous in order to have experiential reports serve as a foundation for the rest of knowledge, has been led to the ideas, for example, that the object of experience is not some material entity but a sense-datum, or that constraints apply to language, that eliminate any theoretical import, all in response to problems that could easily qualify as 'theory-ladenness of experience'.

It seems then as though what has caused so much anxiety following the formulation of the problem of theory-ladenness of observation in the works of Hanson and others isn't all that clear. Was there any *new* problem that EF philosophers such as Carnap were not aware of? Two possibilities are in order.

It could be that post-positivist philosophers, though not formulating any new problem about experience and the foundation of knowledge, could point out the insufficiency of an EF account of experience. Hence, in this case, the contribution of post-positivist philosophers would amount to a recognition that what EF philosophers took for a solution to an existing problem of theory-ladenness of experience was unsatisfactory in some way.

The other possibility is that post-positivist philosophers came up with substantial new problems that were simply not previously acknowledged. In this case, though, it is not obvious for us to determine what these new problems are. Theory-ladenness of experience is more of an umbrella term that has many different formulations in different authors and even in the work of the same author. Exploring the various meanings of this term is of course mandatory if we are to detect any substantial novelty regarding problems of theory-ladenness.

The two aforementioned possibilities have very different epistemological consequences, in that, if the contribution of post-positivist philosophers was to point out new problems, then there is no reason why EF epistemology shouldn't try to respond to them. On the other hand, if Hanson and others were able to show convincingly that an EF account of experience could not respond to the interdependency problem that we have between experiential knowledge and background beliefs, theories and language, then we definitely have to turn to some radically different account of experience, one that is not associated with EF epistemology. Here, I want to defend this second possibility and to offer a raw sketch of an epistemology that takes the aforementioned problem of interdependency seriously, while trying to preserve some form of authority for experience.

Bibliography

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