KANTIAN VIEWS OF EMPIRICAL TRUTH

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ABSTRACT. Let a *Kantian view of empirical truth* be any view according to which the truth of empirical claim depends on the truth of non-empirical claims, because subjects (consciously or not) constitute the empirical when applying the non-empirical to experience. Historically the most important such view is Immanuel Kant's. It is not the only. Rudolf Carnap, Thomas Kuhn, and Donald Davidson held such views. Conversely, Willard van Orman Quine's view was contrastingly instructive. My aim is to briefly sort all this out in search of lessons about the nature of empirical truth generally.

Keywords: anthropocentric; ethnocentric; idiocentric; Kant; Immanuel; logocentric; truth.

Let an *empirical claim* be any semantic object with a truth value that is a function of experience, and let a *non-empirical claim* be anyone with a truth value that is not a function of experience. For present purposes, it does not matter whether such claims are understood as propositions, sentences, contents of beliefs, contents of judgments, or something else. Nor does it matter whether experience is understood as or due to an external world, a state of affairs independent of the subject, or something else. Finally, let a *Kantian view of empirical truth* be any view according to which the truth of empirical claims depends on the truth of non-empirical claims, because subjects (consciously or not) constitute the empirical when applying the non-empirical to experience. Such constitutive dependence, moreover, is both *semantic*, concerning the truth of empirical claims, and *metaphysical*, concerning the nature of those claims themselves.

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Historically the most important Kantian view of empirical truth is Immanuel Kant's. It is not the only. Borrowing from the history of analytic philosophy, I briefly explain that Rudolf Carnap, Thomas Kuhn, and Donald Davidson also held such views, while Willard van Orman Quine held a view contrastingly instructive. Elsewhere (Goldberg 2015, chap. 9) I have examined related themes in detail. My aim here is to briefly sort out the present theme in search of lessons about the nature of empirical truth generally.

1. Kant

Kant's remarks in the *Critique of Pure Reason* about truth are brief but bold:

> The old and famous question with which logicians were to be driven into a corner and brought to such a pass that they must either fall into a miserable circle or else confess their ignorance, hence the vanity of their entire art, is this: **"What is truth?"** The nominal definition of truth, namely that it is the agreement of cognition with its object, is here granted and presupposed; but one demands to know what is the universal and certain criterion of the truth of any cognition. (1787/1998, A57–8/B82)

Yet, surprisingly, Kant concedes that nothing beyond the nominal definition can be had.

I can nevertheless say more on Kant's view of the truth of empirical claims, his synthetic *a posteriori* judgments, on his behalf. While synthetic *a posteriori* judgments are empirical, analytic and synthetic *a priori* judgments are not. Synthetic *a priori* judgments particularly are true in virtue of the categories, or fundamental *a priori* concepts, applied to pure intuition, or the *a priori* forms of space and time. Synthetic *a posteriori* judgments result when subjects apply the synthetic *a priori* to experience.

Consider this example relying on one set of synthetic *a priori* judgments: arithmetic truths. Suppose that a subject forms the true synthetic *a posteriori* judgments that they are in an empty room, that five persons enter, and that seven other persons enter and none leaves. If the subject then forms the synthetic *a posteriori* judgement there are twelve persons beside themselves in the room, then that judgment is true. The truth of the empirical claim that twelve persons beside the subject are in the room depends on the truth of the non-empirical claim that five plus seven equal twelve, because the subject constitutes the empirical when applying the non-empirical to experience. Kant holds a Kantian view of empirical truth.

Further, Kant thinks that all human beings with the same experience would agree that there were twelve persons beside the subject in the room. Generally, he writes: "We can accordingly speak of space, extended beings, and so on only from the human standpoint" (1787/1998, A26/B42). For Kant, we, the relevant subjects, are subjects *qua* human. Synthetic *a priori* judgments are in turn anthropocentric or relative to subjects *qua* human.[1] Because the truth of his non-empirical claims is anthropocentric, the nature of empirical truth is *itself* anthropocentric. For Kant, there is no legitimate sense of empirical truth not relative to subjects *qua* human.

2. Carnap and Kuhn

Carnap and Kuhn, conversely, posit non-empirical claims that are ethnocentric, or relative to subjects *qua* community member. Carnap's are analytic sentences, explicit within linguistic frameworks (1952/1988, suppl. A). Analytic sentences stipulate definitions for a community, which its members use to constitute synthetic sentences, his empirical claims, when applying the analytics to experience. Kuhn's non-empirical claims are implicit within paradigms (1962/2012; 1970/2012; 1979, essay 12), and lexical taxonomies (2002, essays 1–4, 11). Paradigms, *etc.*, stipulate definitions (and more) for a community, which its members use to constitute observations and predictions, his empirical claims, when applying the paradigms to experience. And Carnap and Kuhn are clear throughout that the relevant community is some but not all human beings. For them, the relevant subjects are subjects *qua* community member. They are not subjects *qua* human.

Consider this example relying on one set of analytic sentences or non-empirical claims implicit in a paradigm: conceptions of heavenly bodies. Ptolemaic astronomers, defining 'planet' as any object with a "wandering" geocentric orbit, understand the Moon, the Sun, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn, but not the Earth, as planets. Copernican astronomers, defining 'planet' as any object with a circular heliocentric orbit, understand the Moon as a satellite, the Sun as a star, and the Earth as well as the others are planets. According to both Carnap and Kuhn, the truth of the Ptolemaic empirical claim that Venus is in a particular location in its wandering geocentric orbit depends on the truth of the Ptolemaic non-empirical claim that is its definition of 'planet'. The truth of the Copernican empirical claim that Venus is in a particular location in its circular heliocentric orbit depends on the

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[1] I borrow 'anthropocentric' as applied to Kant's theoretical philosophy from Henry Allison (2004², 34). Philip Pettit, who likens his own view on empirical concepts (2002, 18–20, 50, 90, 96–115) to Kant's, calls such concepts terms "anthropocentric" (13–17, 53–58).

truth of the Copernican non-empirical claim that is its definition of 'planet'. For Carnap and Kuhn, because the truth of their non-empirical claims is ethnocentric, the nature of empirical truth is *itself* ethnocentric. There is no legitimate sense of empirical truth not relative to subjects *qua* community member. Indeed, Michael Friedman (2001, part 2, lecture 1) has persuasively argued that Carnap and Kuhn are both neo-Kantian in something like my sense, and Kuhn himself came to see his view as one that "resembles Kant's a priori when ... taken in … a relativized sense," relativized, *i.e.*, "to time, place, and culture," and therefore to community (2002, 245).[2]

Further, because Kant thinks that all human beings have the same non-empirical claims, while Carnap and Kuhn think that members of different communities have different ones—and community membership can change—Carnap and Kuhn also say something about such change. Carnap (1952/1988, suppl. A) would maintain that "Do planets have a wandering geocentric orbit?" asked internally to a set of analytic sentences stipulating that they do or do not has a "cognitive" answer and so is true or false. Externally it is a "pragmatic" way of asking whether one set of analytic sentences is more "efficient, fruitful, or simple" at constituting synthetic sentences than another. Likewise, Kuhn (1970/2012) would maintain that "Do planets have a wandering geocentric orbit?" asked relative to a paradigm stipulating what a planet is is a question in "normal science" and so is true or false. Independent of any paradigm it is a "non-rational" way of asking whether one paradigm is "'neater', 'more suitable', or 'simpler' than" (155) another—these are also matters of pragmatism—and is fitting not for normal but for "revolutionary" science.

Hence, for Carnap and Kuhn, an empirical claim is true or false relative to non-empirical ones. Non-empirical claims however are neither true nor false in any independent sense. Rather they are pragmatic or non-rational, even revolutionary, ways of asking about choosing the non-empirical claims *per se*. Carnap's and Kuhn's ethnocentric Kantian view of empirical truth is hybridized with pragmatism.

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[2] As Peter Lipton (2003) puts it, Kuhn is "Kant on wheels." For Kuhn (1962/2012, chaps. 9–11; 1970/2012; 2002, essays 2, 5, 11), the ethnocentric nature of concepts is the chief source of incommensurability between different communities. See Goldberg (2015, 74–8). Friedman (2001) tries to combine insights from both Carnap and Kuhn in his own ethnocentric account of science. See Goldberg (2015, 154–9).

3. Quine

Rather than individual non-empirical and empirical claims, Quine thinks that there are general non-empirical and empirical *sources*: "Taken collectively, science has its double dependence upon language and experience; but this duality is not significantly traceable into the sentences of science taken one by one" (1953/2006, 42). All sentences have non-empirical and empirical sources mixed. Quine explicitly rejects Carnap's analytic/synthetic distinction. Nonetheless he agrees with Carnap that that distinction supported Carnap's between cognitivism and pragmatism. Quine just draws the contrapositive inference:

> Carnap, Lewis, and others take a pragmatic stand on the question of choosing between language forms, scientific frameworks; but their pragmatism leaves off at the imagined boundary between the analytic and the synthetic. In repudiating such a boundary I espouse a more thorough pragmatism. Each [person] is given a scientific heritage plus a continuing barrage of sensory stimulation; and the considerations which are used by [them] in warping [their] scientific heritage to fit [their] continuing sensory promptings are, where rational, pragmatic. (1953/2006, 46)

Rejecting the non-empirical/empirical claim distinction, Quine collapses cognitivism into pragmatism. Hence, unlike Carnap (or Kuhn), Quine is no hybridist. It is not the case that empirical claims relative to a set of non-empirical claims are true or false, while non-empirical claims are themselves more or less pragmatic. All claims are true or false relative to non-empirical and empirical sources generally *because* subjects can use them more or less efficiently, fruitfully, or simplistically to process experience. The nature of empirical truth is *itself* pragmatic.

This says nothing about how to understand these subjects—anthropocentrically, ethnocentrically, otherwise—and so the scope of empirical truth. Usually appearing ethnocentric, Quine sometimes seems idiocentric, relativizing truth to each subject *qua* individual, as here:

> Different persons growing up in the same language are like different bushes trimmed and trained to take the shape of identical elephants. The anatomical details of twigs and branches will fulfill the elephantine form differently from bush to bush, but the outward results are alike. (1964, 8)

"Growing up in a language" is an ethnocentric activity, and Quine is apparently saying that language learning, which operates on subjects *qua* community member, masks differences among subjects *qua* individual. For Quine, the nature of empirical truth is *itself* idiocentric.

4. Davidson

There are three reasons that Davidson should seem unlikely to hold a Kantian view of empirical truth. First, Davidson officially maintains that he simply takes truth as primitive. Second, he officially agrees with Quine in rejecting the analytic/synthetic, and so presumably non-empirical/ empirical claim, distinction. And third, he officially argues against the non-empirical/empirical source distinction.

Consider however what he has to say about truth. Davidson (1984/2001, essay 2) endorses Alfred Tarski's (1944/2008) semantic conception of truth in a language, according to which specifying all the conditions under which any sentence in a language is true defines the concept of truth in that language. Davidson in fact claims that devising such a "theory of truth" for a language provides an interpretation of the language. Concerning truth not in a language but *tout court*, however, Davidson explains: "Truth is beautifully transparent …, and I take it as a primitive concept" (2002, 139), and: "Any further attempts to explain, define, or explicate the concept will be empty or wrong…. [A]ll such theories either add nothing to our understanding of truth or have obvious counterexamples" (155).

Nonetheless Davidson elsewhere (2005, chap. 3) says that he can describe some of the *content* of the concept. As explained, he links truth in a language to meaning and interpretation in a language. That suggests that truth *tout court* is linked to meaning *tout court*. Consider what he says about meaning in a language:

> A theory of meaning … is an empirical theory, and its ambition is to account for the workings of a natural language. Like any theory, it may be tested by comparing some of its consequences with the facts. (1984/2001, 24)

Those facts concern the speaker's observable behavior and environment. Interpretive claims—*e.g.*, that 'Snow is white' in English means that snow is white—are themselves empirical. They are constituted when the tools of interpretation are applied to the speaker's observable behavior and environment. Chief among those tools is the principle of charity. The interpreter in basic cases, concerning the directly observable, starts by assuming that the speaker believes roughly what they themselves would believe were they in the speaker's spot, and in non-basic cases constructs a theory of meaning and belief based on these basic cases. Davidson is also committed to the view that, relative to these interpretive claims, which are empirical, the principle of charity is not:

> [C]harity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory [of interpretation]…. Charity is forced on us; whether we like it or not, if we want to understand others, we must count them right in most matters. (1984/2001, 197)

That is because, Davidson adds, it "cannot be a factual question" whether the principle of charity applies to speakers—and so, apparently, whether or not it is true. While it is empirically true or false that 'Snow is white' in English means that snow is white, the principle of charity simply follows from the "underlying methodology of interpretation."

Admittedly, all this is truth (and meaning) in a language. Yet Davidson thinks that that underlying methodology holds for all language users. Nor does he limit himself to human languages, instead both mentioning hypothetical non-human languages, "Saturnian" and "Plutonian" (1984/2001, 186), and invoking an omniscient interpreter who *qua* omniscient would not be human but *qua* interpreter would have to appeal to the principle of charity to interpret a speaker's terms in any language (1984/2001, essay 14; 2002, essay 10). According to Davidson, all interpreters, even omniscient ones, would constitute empirical interpretive claims when applying the principle of charity to a speaker's observable behavior and environment. Just as Kant maintains that "[w]e cannot **think** any object except through categories" (1787/1998, B165), embedded in his synthetic *a priori* judgments, Davidson maintains that we cannot *interpret* any utterances except through the principle of charity. Truth in *any* language is linked to meaning in *any* language and the principle of charity. And that, I maintain, gives me license to talk about truth *tout court* on Davidson's behalf.

So Davidson has a non-empirical/empirical claim distinction: the principle of charity/particular interpretive claims. He therefore has a non-empirical/empirical source distinction: underlying methodology of interpreter/speaker's observable behavior and environment. Further, rather than anthropocentric, ethnocentric, or idiocentric, the principle of charity is *logocentric*, or relative to subjects *qua* language user. It is used to determine meaning in *any* language. "[C]harity is not an option, but a condition of having a workable theory" for any language user, human or non-human, non-omniscient or omniscient. When Davidson continues:

> If we can produce a theory that reconciles charity and the formal conditions for a theory, we have done all that could be done to ensure communication [and a fortiori interpretation]. Nothing more is possible, and nothing more is needed[,]

he means that nothing more is possible, and nothing more is needed, for any language user to interpret a speaker's claims at all. Any language constitutes empirical interpretive claims when applying the principle of charity to a speaker's observable behavior and environment. The truth of those interpretive claims depends on the truth of the principle of charity in the sense that it is not an option but a condition of interpretation. For Davidson, the nature of empirical truth in

interpretation is *itself* logocentric. There is no legitimate sense of empirical truth in interpretation not relative to subjects *qua* language user.[3]

Davidson therefore has nothing like Carnap's or Kuhn's hybridism. For Davidson, interpreting is like answering one of Carnap's internal questions or engaging in Kuhn's normal science. It is always relative to the principle of charity. Nor does Davidson have anything like Quine's view that cognitivism collapses into pragmatism. An interpretive claim about what an utterance means is true or false, not because it is more or less pragmatic, but because the claim does or does not follow from an interpreter's theory of meaning for a speaker's language. Though some interpretations are more pragmatic than others in the pedestrian sense of being simpler, *etc.*, the truth of an interpretation remains distinct.

5. Lessons

What lessons does this all-too brief historical tale, from Kant to Davidson, tell? First, according to a Kantian view of empirical truth, because subjects (consciously or not) constitute empirical claims when applying non-empirical claims to experience—and they can be subjects *qua* individual, community member, human, or language user—empirical truth is itself idiocentric, ethnocentric, anthropocentric, or logocentric, respectively. Second, if there are different non-empirical claims for subjects to choose between, then doing so is not cognitive or normal but instead pragmatic or revolutionary. Such a view would be hybrid. In the limiting case in which a Kantian view of empirical truth is logocentric, such as Davidson's, there can be only one set of non-empirical claims. So a logocentric Kantian view of empirical truth cannot be hybrid. And third, though not itself a Kantian view of empirical truth, any view that rejects the non-empirical/empirical claim, but retains the non-empirical/empirical source, distinction, rejects the cognitivism/pragmatism distinction.

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[3] See Goldberg (2015, 228–31).

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